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ONLINE EDUCATION: THE IMPACT OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICS ON
TEACHERS' SITUATIONALLY
CONSTRAINED CHOICE

By

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ABSTRACT
ONLINE EDUCATION: THE IMPACT OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICS ON
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CONSTRAINED CHOICE

Rhianan E. Smith, B.S., M.A.

Marquette University, 2012

Online education has been increasing at an astounding rate, and advocates contend this trend will transform schooling as we know it. The current research has been centered on the student outcomes in online education. However, this myopic focus on outcomes underestimates the broader systemic factors that may be driving the implementation and everyday practices which impact student outcomes.

This study investigates the economic, political, and organizational factors that influence the situationally constrained choices of an online teacher. This study identifies the ways in which higher education budgets, policies, and technological resources impact what teachers do in the classroom while investigating the everyday practices of teachers that may challenge or reinforce the opportunities and constraints created by these systemic factors at a community college. After talking with faculty and administrators, it became clear that the economic enrollment and retention pressures combined with increased faculty course loads do not encourage the development of an academically rigorous course. Furthermore, the lack of clarity surrounding the mission and the organizational practice of using copied course shells encourage teachers to create a course that promotes retention over academic quality.

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I. INTRODUCTION: ONLINE EDUCATION AND TEACHER'S SITUATIONALLY CONSTRAINED CHOICE

The growth of online education in the last decade has been nothing short of astounding. A 2011 study conducted by the Sloan Consortium reports that 2500 colleges nationwide and over 6 million students were enrolled in at least one online class last year (Sloan Consortium, 2011). This translates to 1 out of 4 college students taking at least one class online in a year alone. Online education is frequently portrayed as higher education's "magic bullet" by promising to make the academy more accessible, affordable and effective (Van Dusen, 1997). Online education in practice is often criticized for reproducing a "digital divide" where already marginalized students receive an inferior education.

The rapid growth in online education has been matched by an equally astounding amount of research, as evidenced by a recent ERIC search producing nearly 13,000 hits. The vast majority of this research is focused on the outcomes of online education for students. Anderson (2004) in his book, *The theory and practice of online learning*, argues that the consequences of online education most frequently discussed in the literature can be categorized under three research paradigms: technological utopians (advocates), dystopians (critics) and utilitarians (skeptics).

Anderson articulates that the research categorized as technological utopian, demonstrates online education's superiority to traditional classroom instruction. The two most common claims for superiority are: increased access for nontraditional students and more individualized learning based on constructivist methods. Certainly access to educational course offerings can be improved for students in remote areas far from college campuses, or students for whom attending school on campus is difficult because

of financial constraints related to jobs, children or full-time enrollment costs. Some evidence supports the claim that online course options can increase access for some nontraditional students, namely older, white, employed individuals (Larreamendy-Joerns & Keinhardt, 2006). While some evidence reveals that nontraditional white students are benefiting from increased access to college through online course options, the research does not demonstrate that minority and low income students are benefiting from online course access (Schneider & Germann, 1999, Bocchi 2004). This could be due to several factors, the most influential being accessibility to the course technology. Online courses can increase access if students have the compatible technology and knowledge and use of that technology at home. Most online courses require a high speed internet connection and up to date software packages. According to a portion of the 2010 Census, 40% of Americans still have no internet access at home.

The second claim of the utopian based research is that online education increases student opportunities for individualized learning based on constructivist methods. Online students often cite convenience and flexibility as the top two benefits of an online course, because the course work can be done to some extent on the student's time (Bourne, Harris & Mayadas, 2005). However, most online education classes are not "at the students pace" but require formal due dates which are less flexible and individualized than students often assume. Furthermore, the utopian argument that online education is more constructivist based is not necessarily supported by research (Rossett, 2002). Any course can be designed to be more constructivist, but the practices do not always reflect the goal. As Rossett (2002) explains, only when there is adequate technology support and teacher support for the goal of student learning does constructivist curriculum exist in

online courses. The possibility is there to create quality online courses, but that is not necessarily represented in practice.

Anderson argues that the dystopian based research counters utopian access and improved learning claims and argues that online education produces a “digital divide” where already marginalized students are offered an inferior education. In particular, they examine how social inequality is reproduced in online education by the parlaying of social capital from offline to online spaces (Malaby, 1996). The skills needed to succeed in an online class such as, reading and writing, are perhaps even more important in an online course where the assessment is heavily text based. Students who have had the education and opportunity to obtain those skills seem the most likely to succeed.

Furthermore, the utopian best practice research emphasizes the ways in which online classes can be communities of learning where students can achieve higher grades, test scores and satisfaction rates than in the traditional classroom. Dystopians counter the claims of constructivist pedagogy and increased achievement by criticizing the measures used to make these conclusions. Often researchers use test scores and grades as the sole measure of overall performance. Dystopians argue that this is not an accurate measure to test the effectiveness of online learning since what matters more is the curriculum. Dystopians contend that online courses are often based on declarative knowledge which is the lowest level of learning and students can be quite effective when the curriculum is based on methods of instruction that emphasize drill and test (Sitzmann, 2006).

Any educational practice has the potential to improve student learning for the positive or negative. Utopian and dystopian research paradigms represent opposite sides of the spectrum of online course outcomes. In the middle of these extremes is the

research that argues that the method of instructional delivery is of little importance for educational outcomes (utilitarians).

Anderson introduces the utilitarians as those studies which demonstrate the neutrality of technology. Researchers articulate that the student outcomes in online education are based on instructional practices and not the online delivery of content. Utilitarian research centers upon comparison studies between online and traditional courses and concludes that there is “no significant difference” between them based on achievement, satisfaction and retention (Russell, 2005). Utilitarian research attempts to better operationalize variables between online and traditional course options in order to make more accurate comparisons. In their argument, what becomes most important for student outcomes are teacher’s instructional practices not the mode of delivery.

Looking at the vast amount of online research and the perspectives of the utopian, dystopian and utilitarian research findings, it appears that online education can be superior, inferior or have no effect on student outcomes. These results, contradictory as they may seem, are framing the possible outcomes myopically. David Noble (1998) in his book *Digital Diploma Mills*, argues that when studying the impact of any educational practice what is most important is examining the political and economic factors which are driving the implementation and everyday practices. One important reason that online courses can have so many different outcomes is because there are larger political, economic and organizational influences that are guiding the implementation, practices and ultimately consequences. It makes more sense to frame the discussion about online course outcomes not on the end results, but on the systemic factors shaping the design and practices. Certainly these broader factors can vary by institution, which is why some

students excel and others do not. The broader political and economic forces affect all implementation and practices to some degree, how they are negotiated by institutions and individual faculty likely varies considerably.

Furthermore, the research trend treating online education as an entirely new reform that can be studied in isolation is a frequent mistake that leaves out an important historical correlate with correspondence education. It was in the late 1800's when correspondence classes were introduced and the school building was first removed from education as distance education became a reality, students could take college courses for credit by mail. Correspondence courses have several interesting parallels with online courses. They both offered a utopian claim of increased access and individualized learning for the nontraditional student. They both met the dystopian counterargument of distance education replicating the social and economic divide and offering an inferior education for nontraditional, often marginalized students.

Utopian claims of access and individualized learning are reminiscent of earlier claims made by advocates of correspondence courses. These classes could be completed when students had time and were cheaper since students did not have to pay the typical costs associated with being a full-time traditional student that lives on campus. Certainly access was opened to a poorer population that often worked full-time jobs. The dystopian reality is that the courses were taught by part-time teachers who had heavy course loads and almost no institutional support which according to Noble, led to huge numbers of drop-outs.

According to Noble (1998), as a consequence of the larger political and economic factors, correspondence courses met their demise because they were based on a design

that almost guaranteed failure. The success of these courses, he argued, depended on keeping costs down and enrollment up. The budget then for these ventures was put into enrollment marketing and not curriculum and instruction. Attracting students was the goal and enrollment standards were dismissed as they interfered with the schools ability to get as many students as possible. Already overloaded teachers struggled with students who needed more assistance and schools whose main goal was to increase enrollment and cut costs. Many students struggled in these courses and often received little assistance; as a consequence they dropped out in large numbers. There is little information on who was successful in these courses, but the education they received was viewed as inferior by faculty and the public alike who regarded correspondence courses as an attempt to commodify education, hence the title “*Diploma Mills*” (Noble, 1998).

The commodification or commercialization of education is nothing new, but according to Noble, online education represents the final frontier with the commodification of the curriculum. In the past, universities have been highly commercialized with their sports programs and dining services. In both of these situations the universities and the corporations mutually benefited from the increased revenues that these relationships offered. Jennifer Washburn (2005) in her book, *University Inc: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education* argues that recently there has been a significant change with the university itself acting as a corporation. This began with the universities ability to profit off of their professor’s research and intellectual patents and most recently with universities’ ability to package curriculum and sell it for profit internally and externally. As the university faces increased political pressure from both inside and outside sources to function like a corporation, the goals

become more focused on increasing profits and decreasing costs, which has consequences for teaching and learning.

Noble demonstrated the importance of studying the broader political and economic factors which impact the implementation of educational practices, such as commercialization, on the student outcomes. However, Noble is not the first researcher to examine the importance of economic and political factors shaping schooling outcomes. Bowles and Gintis (1976) in their book, *Schooling for Capitalist America*, studied the impact of capitalism on schools reproducing the socio-economic structure. They demonstrated with Census data that schools are not agents of mobility, but simply an arena where social privilege gets transformed into merit. The contribution of Bowles and Gintis as well as Noble is significant for my research focus. They both draw attention to the broader sociological implications impacting schooling outcomes. What Noble, and Bowles and Gintis leave out is an examination of the individual's power to act and react within these constraining structures.

Completely materialist examinations leave little hope for positive change and individual impact. The symbolic interaction approach counters materialistic claims by examining the ways in which society is constructed through everyday interactions. Paul Willis (1977), in his book *How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs*, criticizes the deterministic arguments such as those made by Bowles and Gintis and studies the everyday practices where kids produce themselves as lower class. Willis points out that stating the structural factors is really no explanation at all, it does not explain the everyday interactions where by kids have power. For my study then, it's important that I examine the political and economic factors that are guiding online courses

implementation and practices, but it is equally important to understand what the individuals do within these limiting structures. In an interesting combination of these theories, Larry Cuban studies the situationally constrained choice of teachers.

In Larry Cuban's (1984) book *How Teachers Taught*, Cuban explains situationally constrained choice as the historical, political, economic, cultural and organizational influences that constrain what teachers do in the classroom. Cuban also studies what teachers do every day in their classrooms. According to Cuban, there has been far more continuity in teaching practices than change. The situationally constrained choice is largely based on the organizational structure of schools and the culture of teaching (Cuban, 1984, 1986). Cuban examines teachers constrained choice with the use of technology. My study will examine teachers constrained choice in a completely online class.

My research proposes to examine this situationally constrained choice in an online class using the theoretical basis of Noble, Bowles and Gintis, Willis and Cuban to explore the possible outcomes of an online course for students and teachers- utopian, dystopian and utilitarian explanations at the course level are too simplistic. Rather, to understand the possible consequences of online education it needs to be examined through a complex analysis of the economic, political and organizational factors pushing the implementation and practices, while simultaneously examining the teacher's own practices through their situationally constrained choice. We can now look to online education and ask what have been the economic and political factors driving the rapid growth, while trying not to overstate the case and ignoring the impact of oscillations at each level, the state, institution and classroom. The state, institution and teacher can all

impact the outcomes even in a determined environment. All of these factors constrain the possible student outcomes in online courses.

My study will incorporate purposeful sampling to understand the situationally constrained choice of teachers. I will begin with an examination of the politics of higher education policy that impacts online education implementation and practices. Next, I will study the economic influences that shape online course offerings and enrollment. Thirdly, I will study organizational factors related to technology support for students and teachers. Lastly, I will examine teachers situationally constrained choices as it relates, or perhaps does not relate to those larger factors. All of this will provide a frame that helps us understand the structure and function of online courses and possible student outcomes.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: ONLINE EDUCATION RESEARCH

Online course offerings in higher education are exploding. The outcomes of online education are being hotly debated, with advocates hailing it as the latest and greatest educational reform, critics pointing out the negative consequences and skeptics arguing that the mode of educational delivery is neutral. The current research emphasis on the outcomes of online education misses an examination of the broader economic and political forces that shape the implementation and practices in an online course.

Online education is now a mainstay at the post-secondary level. A U.S. Department of Education (2007) study reports that public 2-year institutions have been the most receptive to online education with an amazing 97% offering online classes (p. 3). The public 4-year level is close behind with 88% offering online courses (p. 3). A (2011) U.S. Department of Education study reports that from 2000-2008 the percentage of students enrolled in an online class increased from 8% to 20% (p.1). Economic recessions predictably increase higher education enrollments; however, the demand for online courses has exceeded the demand for more face-to-face offerings with a growth of 21% in online courses and 2% in face-to-face (Sloan Consortium, 2009).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2007) statistics, the reasons for the dramatic growth in online course offerings are: student demand for flexible schedules (68 percent), providing access to college students who would otherwise not have access (67 percent), making more classes available (46 percent), and seeking to increase enrollment (45 percent) (p. 3). The growth is well documented, but what are the consequences of online education? Researchers have been trying to answer that question with sometimes mixed results.

In Anderson's (2004) book, *The Theory and Practice of Online Learning*, he summarizes the three central research findings in online education research as: utopian (advocates), dystopian (critics) and utilitarian (skeptics). The advocates of online education claim that it is a fundamentally new reform that brings with it the promise of more democratic education by increasing access and eliminating barriers across SES, race and geographic location; the truly global classroom where students can connect with classmates all over the world. The reality of practice in an online class is often at odds with the utopian ideal. The technological critics counter the claims of the utopians and argue that instead of eliminating barriers, the reality of online education is the “digital divide,” where social and economic inequality is reproduced in online courses (Malaby, 1996). While utopians advocate that online education increases access, critics claim that the first barrier of online education is one of accessibility (Collins & Berger, 1996).

A review of the research supports the claim that online education has widened access to certain categories of nontraditional students who have a much more difficult time attending the traditional college (Larreamendy-Joerns & Keinhardt, 2006). These students are typically older, with dependents and holding down full-time jobs while they attend school (Kolowich, 2010). Though there is evidence that online education reaches older students, gender is typically split equally and white students constitute 86.2% of enrollment (Schneider & Germann, 1999). Bocchi (2004) confirmed these results and reports that less than 10% of online learners come from a minority group. While online education options appear to increase access for older, white job holders, this hardly represents democratic access. A likely explanation for the lack of minority representation

in online courses is their social class background that affects both their access to college and access to technology to participate in an online class.

Online education critics contend that is not just access to online education but success and credit in an online course that matters. One of the problems most researched with online courses is the large numbers of “stop outs”, which are students who simply stop doing school work even while being formally enrolled. Today online classes report having nearly a 50% drop out rate (Stanford-Bowers, 2008; Tyler-Smith, 2006). While I was unable to find any data examining the demographic characteristics of “stop outs”, critics explain that persistence in an online course is influenced by the amount of social and economic capital outside the online class. Students who remain are often students with above average reading and writing abilities. These above average reading and writing skills are likely linked with quality of previous education and student’s socioeconomic background. The evidence does not make a case that online education produces increased access or success for disadvantaged groups.

The online education research does reveal that students report high levels of satisfaction in their online courses. The greatest benefit advocated by online supporters is that learning can occur, “Any time, any place, any path, any pace.” This has even become the official slogan for online education made by the *National Association of State Boards of Education* (NASBE, 2001). Students cite flexibility and individualized learning as the top two benefits of an online course (Bourne, Harris & Mayadas, 2005; Hannay & Newvine, 2006; Rivera & Roland, 2008). Students like online classes because they are convenient and allow them to do school work when they have time. “I can save my schoolwork for when I have time; sometimes it’s at two in the morning” (Bourne,

2005). Critics contend that technological glitches often interfere with this convenience. Online learning cannot take place when the system is down, which is an inevitable occurrence. Furthermore, flexibility and high levels of student satisfaction does not necessarily mean quality education.

What is quality education according to online best practice research? There are several studies which center upon best practices in online courses (Gudea, 2008 and Fish & Wickersham 2009). Fish and Wickersham (2009) in their review of the best practice literature argue that student learning of a complex body of knowledge is served best when there is a community of learners and that online communities can enhance, expand and support these communities. In online communities then there is more opportunity for constructivist based learning based on the contributions of every member of the learning community. According to Fish and Wickersham (2009) because online courses allow more democratic participation there are more opportunities for learning communities and constructivist practices where members can build off each others knowledge. According to its supporters, online education “introduces unprecedented options for teaching, learning and knowledge building” (Harasim, 1990: xvii), and can help “create communities of inquiry capable of stimulating intellectual, moral, and educational growth among rich and poor alike” (Cummings and Sayers 1995: ix).

The bulk of the research argues that constructivist pedagogy is best for an online class, but the research detailing exactly what this entails or if this is what is occurring was not found. Much of the research focused on what could be possible with computer technology, not what is actually happening. Furthermore, the argument that “rich and poor alike” benefit from constructivist communities in online classes was not evidenced

by any research that I was able to locate. There is not evidence that poor students are more likely to be successful in an online course and I would argue the opposite is probably true as based on the previous research evidencing superior reading and writing skills influencing online success. According to Rossett (2002), online learning has many promises to improve student learning, but it takes commitment and resources from teachers and schools to be done right. Rossett articulates that doing it right means that online learning materials must be designed properly, with the learners and learning as the main objective, and adequate technological support must be provided to both faculty and students. What is adequate faculty support and training? Is this what is happening? I couldn't find the answers to these questions.

What the research does contain is an elaboration of the learning outcomes of an online class. In 2009 the U.S. Department of Education in their report entitled, *Evaluation of evidence based practices in online learning* evaluated over ten years of online learning research and 1100 studies. Their meta analysis found that students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction. This was found to be statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level, but the authors themselves caution that performance is measured in course grades and may not reflect differences in quality of instruction, but differences in time on task. There could be many other intervening variables that actually influence grades in an online course, as Sitzmann (2006) found in his meta analysis, online learners are superior in declarative knowledge outcomes and equivalent in procedural knowledge outcomes. If online courses are constructed to test lower levels of knowledge, such as declarative it would make sense that grades would be higher. Declarative knowledge is one of the lowest levels of

learning and online students have access to multiple resources while completing course work, so grades may not be an accurate representation of student learning in an online course.

Other outcome based research argues that the medium of instruction has no effect on student performance. Clark (1983) claims for example, that technologies are, “mere vehicles that deliver instruction but do not influence student achievement any more than the truck that delivers our groceries delivers nutrition” (p. 445). Clark claims that meta-analysis studies demonstrate that student’s gain significant learning benefits from audiovisual or computer media, as opposed to conventional instruction; however, the same studies also suggest that the reason for those benefits is not the medium of instruction, but the instructional strategies built into the learning materials. Furthermore, Clark (1983) posits that the overall consensus of this research is that online courses provide comparable achievement rates with “brick and mortar” schools as based on standardized test scores and graduation rates. This group of meta analysis studies is comparing test score success and completion rates. Basing success on test scores and grades has been addressed previously, completion rates is interesting. The research on the number of “stop outs” raises questions about who was included in these completion rate comparisons.

A 2004 meta-analysis of 232 studies conducted between 1985 and 2002 illustrates that there is no significant difference between traditional classrooms and online education in student achievement, attitude and retention (Bernard and Abrami, 2004). In 1995 Sorenson reported, “There are generally no differences in achievement between students in traditional classes and those in distance-delivered classes, or between distance students

and remote sites and those at origination sites when a teacher is present” (p.384). Firstly, achievement rates are the standard measure of comparison in most of the online education research. Achievement rates are typically test scores or grades. Critics argue that this measure can be highly skewed since online students often have an advantage of open book coursework, and courses may be structured to access declarative knowledge. Secondly, the measure of student satisfaction is typically cited in the comparison studies. Students do report a high degree of satisfaction with online classes because of the convenience not necessarily content or experience. Critics contend that comparison studies wrongly evaluate online and traditional classrooms along the same line. Though the technology itself may be neutral, its consequences are not. Technology based education carries with it taken for granted advantages for students with superior text based skills and access to technology.

The research on online education and outcomes demonstrates a few contradictory results. For the online advocates the focus is on how online classes can increase access for nontraditional students and provide constructivist curriculum based on learners needs. The critics provide the much more cynical view of the digital divide and inferior education offered to already marginalized students. Anderson (2004) argues,

Unsurprisingly, there is hesitancy about ICTs as a force of democratization in education. On the one hand, access to information and the ability to communicate across time and space has positive outcomes for the provision of education to learners with widely varying profiles and needs. On the other hand, the promise of technology can be constrained by the incompatibilities with the organizational structures of the institutions that host it, the political and social agendas driving its application, the poor quality of student access to the networks that support it and the low degree of efficacy of the pedagogical frameworks that surround its use (p. 45).

Online education is growing and research demonstrates the possible positive, negative and neutral outcomes of online education. However, the research focus on the outcomes of online education leaves out a broader examination that includes an examination of the factors driving the growth, implementation and practices in an online class. David Noble (1998) in his book *Digital Diploma Mills*, examines the first distance education practice, correspondence courses. Noble demonstrates how the broader economic and political forces influence the design, implementation and practices of correspondence courses. These factors then influence outcomes for students by constraining what can occur. The implementation of a new technology or reform undoubtedly influences the educational practices which serve to benefit some and harm others. This is an area in the online education research which is largely ignored by the myopic focus on the possible outcomes of online classes.

Distance Education in the Past: Correspondence Courses

Correspondence courses provide a historical lens through which to examine online education. Correspondence education was by mail, mostly as an independent study course, but the earliest example of asynchronous distance education. There are some important differences between correspondence education and online; however, both correspondence courses and online courses remove the school from education and would be considered distance education offerings. Both have utopian claims of increased access and dystopian criticisms of low quality education offered to an already marginalized population. Noble (1998) demonstrates that in the case of correspondence courses the design and implementation almost guaranteed the negative consequences regardless of the method of instruction or dedication of teachers because the success of correspondence courses rested on enrollment. Correspondence education did deliver on the promise to open access to a population previously left out of higher education, but the utopian access claims were quickly challenged by dystopian realities of lower quality education. Noble argues that the quality of the correspondence courses was inferior because of the economic and political factors shaping the implementation and practices (Noble, 1998).

In the late 1800's the first correspondence courses were offered. Isaac Pitman is acknowledged for starting the first correspondence course in 1840, when he taught students shorthand by mail (Maeroff, 2003). In the 1880's Thomas Foster a business owner offered a for profit vocational training course on mine safety. The success of these for profit ventures led to a boom in correspondence offerings in the private sector first and the public sector later. By 1926 there were three hundred of these schools in the United States with an annual income of 70 million (one and a half times the income of all colleges and universities combined), with fifty new schools starting each year (Noble, 1998).

University based correspondence education began in the 1890's and by the early 1900's it became a trend that matched the current zeal for online education (Noble, 1998). The University of Wisconsin and University of Chicago were among the first to embrace this education. The selling point for correspondence courses was the utopian claims of democratizing education and individualized instruction for busy people. It was often hailed as superior to in-class instruction by its ability to individualize learning and increase access to nontraditional students. According to Harvey F. Mallory, head of the University of Chicago's home study department, correspondence education provides three unique advantages over traditional instruction, "you receive individual personal attention; you work as rapidly as you can, or as slowly as necessary; and your studies may begin at any time and be carried on according to any personal schedule and any place where postal service is available" (Noble, 1998 p.10). The majority of those who enrolled in correspondence courses were in fact non-traditional students that would not have otherwise had access to a college education because of work constraints, cost of

full-tuition or enrollment requirements (MacKenzie, Christensen, & Rigby, 1968). They were non-traditional, but in all likelihood white working class student's, similar to online education enrollment today.

Noble argues that the success of correspondence education at the university level rested on securing enrollment. Funds were then directed towards promotional activities that increased and secured enrollment. Correspondence courses became most profitable as the students dropped out, because the courses demanded up front payment with a no refund option and teachers were part-time and paid on a piecework basis. In order to continue to secure and increase enrollment, schools chose to lower or even dismiss enrollment standards entirely. Correspondence courses quickly became known as “dropout mills” in the higher education community and were seen by many educators at the time as a commercial attempt to make education a commodity (Noble, 1998).

While correspondence education directed funds towards advertising and at the same time lowered enrollment standards, they also allocated very little of the budget for instruction and curriculum. Teachers were hired to do the correspondence coursework on a piecework basis. Many of the instructors were working part-time with a heavy course load (Noble, 1998). Since enrollment standards were low many of the teachers faced real instructional challenges and then were offered very little pay and institutional support (Noble, 1998). Regular faculty saw correspondence courses as an inferior education and eventually the overall popularity declined as the quality of this education was repeatedly brought into question (Gudea, 2008). While access increased, improved instruction didn't appear to be a realistic benefit. What becomes clear in Noble's analysis of early forms of distance education is that it was the political and economic factors shaping the

implementation and practices of correspondence courses and not necessarily the content of the course or dedication of the teacher that shaped the student outcomes.

As the enrollment advertisements increased and the standards decreased, funds were directed towards keeping it going rather than quality instruction. This design and implementation influenced the practices in all of these courses. Focusing solely on the outcomes of correspondence courses for students ignored the political and economic influences that are in fact shaping those very consequences (Noble, 1998). It becomes essential then to study the larger political and economic influences shaping the implementation and practices of an online course as Noble has demonstrated through his examination of correspondence education. Noble further articulates that distance education represents the “final frontier” in the commodification of education.

Commercialization of Higher Education

Online education has the potential to offer benefits to students, teachers and schools. It also runs the risk of commodifying and changing education. Distance learning is a key element in the trend towards commercialization of education which also includes wider trends towards vouchers and charter schools. The class becomes a discrete product that is separated from the one who produces it and is offered for sale. Clark Kerr (1991) in his book *The Great Transformation of Higher Education 1960-1980*, argues that the commercialization of higher education is the most profound change in higher education of the last few decades, which began with sports and the commercialization of the campus. Only recently has the university functioned as a corporation through commodification of research and the classroom.

Commercialization first entered higher education through sports programs. Keith Dunnavant (2004) examines in his book, *The fifty year seduction*, the 50 year struggle for football money. The NCAA allowed major television networks to have a stake in college football. This led to a monopolistic control over college sports telecasts. Not only did sports branding have a connection with the viewing but substantial commercial

interests in the branding and business related to sports. Dunnivant says the sports became less about the game and more about the economic gain by the new owners, the television stations who became the ones making the major decisions about the games.

Sports teams may have been first to jump on the corporate bandwagon, but the rest of the college campus followed shortly after. Kevin Knifflin (2000) in his book, *Campus Inc: Corporate power in the Ivory Tower* studied the increasing corporatization of the campus environment by companies such as Sodexo and Nike. Sodexo is the food giant that dominates over 75% of college campus and offers higher priced food to an already cash strapped population. Nike has trademark licensing with not only most college sports teams but university clothing as well. Most recently computer companies such as Dell and IBM are seeking monopolistic licensing over campus computers. Walk through any college campus today and the influence of corporations is pervasive.

Both the commercialization of sports teams and the college campus represent corporate relationships with universities where both stand to profit, but only recently beginning with university research has the university itself acted as a corporation. This was made possible by the 1980 Bayh-Dole act or University and Small Business Patents Procedures Act which made it possible for universities to patent faculty research for profit (Kerr, p. 53). Jennifer Washburn in her 2005 book, *University Inc.* examines the path of transforming the university into a corporation through the patenting of faculty research. The commodification of research opened the door to profit off of faculty through copyright ownership in the very lucrative fields of biotechnology and engineering. As a consequence those departments that were most profitable were placed at the forefront of the university and faculty was under increasing pressure to make their

research profitable. In many ways the final frontier of commercialization of higher education is the classroom itself, this is being realized through online courses.

Distance learning is a key element in the trend towards commercialization of higher education. According to Noble (1998) as a consequence of commodification teachers feel the pressures of routinization of work; speedup, greater managerial supervision, pressures to reduce costs and job insecurity (p. 4). Certainly there are some benefits to commercialization of the university such as increased profits, but the focus of this research is how such trends as commercialization influence what can happen in an online course by constraining the course and teacher choices and inevitably the outcomes for students. Unlike Noble, however, I would argue that it's equally important to position the teacher's ability to exercise constrained choice and impact students in these courses. It is important to examine the broader forces driving some of the growth of online courses, one which is the commercialization of higher education.

Again we can look to the trend of free online education which Chubb and Moe contend, "Online education will lead to the substitution of technology (which is cheap) for labor (which is expensive) can vastly increase access to elite caliber education" and will lead to "the historic transformation in how students learn, teachers teach and schools and school systems are organized." Though the others agree that these courses are no substitute for in-class traditional learning, they argue that this is the biggest single change to hit education since the printing press. The schools have paid the initial startup costs for EDX, but have set aside no money to maintain this venture (Wall Street Journal, 2012).

Teacher's Situationally Constrained Choice

While studying the larger economic and political forces influencing the growth and outcomes of online education, such as commercialization, it is also essential to examine the influence that teachers have at the classroom level. At the k-12 level, the influence of larger political and economic factors and how it has been translated into teacher practices has been studied by Larry Cuban in his book *How Teachers Taught* (1984). Cuban examines what he terms “the paradox of continuity and change” within American schools. According to Cuban, school reforms have come and gone; they have usually been administered from the top down and gone through a cycle of: exhilaration (utopian), scientific credibility (utilitarian), disappointment (dystopian) and finally teacher bashing (1984, p. 5).

Cuban cites three reasons for the dual functions of continuity and change in American classrooms which he terms *situationally constrained choice*. First, he discusses the flawed implementation that has often come from the top down. Teachers are rarely consulted or involved in making the decisions that affect their everyday practices. Secondly, the physical space of school is designed to support more teacher-centered educational practices not new technologies. Thirdly, Cuban addresses the culture of teaching that has been shaped by those who are likely to reaffirm the traditional values of teaching rather than challenge them. This is why, according to Cuban, there has been far more continuity in teaching practices than change. The situationally constrained choice is largely based on the organizational structure of schools and the culture of teaching (Cuban, 1984, 1986). Cuban argues that classrooms continued to be teacher-

centered, highly structured and based on the same practices that we all remember as children.

Though policies have changed goals or some aspect of the bureaucracy of schooling, classroom practices have remained relatively stable and based on teacher centered methods. According to Cuban, the case of technology has proved to be no different. Technology as part of the k-12 school reform agenda first surfaced in early 1900s; it was film and radio that was going to transform education. Advocates of film believed it would replace textbooks and improve and equalize education. The actual use of film in the classroom was infrequent because of the cost, accessibility and its overall lack of effectiveness. Teachers had to track down the projector, set it up and find an applicable film to show. The critics blamed the slowness of schools and teachers in particular to respond to the broader technological changes occurring in society (Cuban, 1986, p. 26).

In the 1950s and 1960s television was going to revolutionize education. According to Cuban, "Television was hurled at teachers" (p. 36). Television was celebrated, compared with traditional instruction, and argued to be not significantly different than regular instruction. Technocentric utopians worshipped the new technology and teachers rarely used it. The technocentric reformers were quick to blame teachers, principals, and excessive bureaucracy for the lack of incorporation of the latest and greatest technology.

In the 1970s and 1980s it was multimedia and teleconferencing that was hailed as the educational technological revolution. In the 1990s computers were the latest technological reform hoped to transform education. According to Tyack and Cuban

(1995), policy elites proposed a technological utopian vision for education policy that assumes schools function to support a globalized market economy. Cuban combines a research focus on the broader political and economic factors by examining the constrained choice of teacher's everyday practices.

Obviously computers have become essential to our way of life, to communicate, to work. Students, parents and legislators have been pressuring schools to incorporate more technology and prepare students for a global market economy. The cycle of exhilaration, scientific credibility, disappointment and teacher bashing has been repeated over and over with technology incorporation, that we could hypothesize that computers will be no different. The use of computers within the schools has been examined in Cuban's (2001) book, *Computers in School: Oversold and Underused*, he argues, "Integration of computers into classroom curricula and instructional techniques was minimal" (p. 90). There were several reasons for the lack of incorporation but ultimately it did not revolutionize teaching and learning (Cuban 2001, p. 130). Teachers prefer tools that are flexible and serve their purposes. Cuban (1986) states, "Teachers have altered their practice when a technological innovation helped them do a better job of what they already decided had to be done and matched their view of daily classroom relationships" (p.66). In the case of computers in schools, Cuban demonstrates that the implementation was minimal because of larger organizational factors.

According to Cuban (1986), policy makers ask very different questions about productivity, equity and tests than teachers do (p. 67). Whereas teachers base success on student learning, policy makers and reformers are more interested in broader notions of accountability and performance standards. Cuban also explains "the social and political

organization of schooling, societal expectations for schools and historical legacies, all of which influences what occurs in classrooms” (p. 156). Cuban’s research has provided insight into the situationally constrained choice of teachers, but in an online class the situation may be different. In the online class the computer is no longer a tool, but the medium for instruction. The physical constraints of the classroom are also removed.

Using Cuban’s research we can now look to online education and ask what have been the economic and political factors driving the policy changes, while trying not to overstate the case and ignoring the impact of oscillations at each level; the state, institution and classroom. Online classrooms are different than using computers in a traditional classroom, because the traditional classroom is replaced by the computer. Using Cuban’s insights we can apply the idea of situationally constrained choice to a completely online class.

Online classes are a relatively new and popular educational practice. It’s important to study the outcomes of this practice on students, as much educational research has done. However, a myopic focus on the outcomes for students without examining the broader political, economic and organizational influences fails to grasp the driving factors that have considerable influence on what is possible for student outcomes.

Theory: Political Economy and Everyday Practices

Noble (1998) is not the first researcher to investigate the influence of the political economy in shaping the consequences of schooling. Noble’s examination centered upon higher education, but the k-12 system has also been studied through these lens. In *Schooling in Capitalist America*, (1976) Bowles and Gintis argue that capitalism necessitates oppressive and exploitive social relationships which are replicated in

schools. According to Bowles and Gintis, schools are not and cannot possibly be the “great equalizer” or agents of social mobility in a capitalist hierarchical system of power and control, schools are merely agents of social efficiency and class reproduction.

Bowles and Gintis posit that schools are about providing workers for employers, social control, familiarity with the concept of dominance in relationships, fragmentation of groups, and are legitimators for the myth of meritocracy (p.56).

Bowles and Gintis further contend that every educational reform has been used by capitalists to cool down social unrest. When workers are upset with their working conditions the owners bring the struggle into the schoolroom. The owners respond with an educational reform and effectively displace the entire argument about working conditions. Bowles and Gintis insist that the only lasting and effective change would be a radical transformation of the economy in favor of socialism. Bowles and Gintis incorporate census data to examine the social reproduction that results from the organization of schooling.

An insight from Bowles and Gintis that relates to my research focus is that it’s the economic factors that are most influential in influencing consequences for students, not characteristics of classrooms, teachers or even students. Incorporating this insight for my research then, requires an examination of the economic factors driving online education growth and practices.

As Noble (1998) demonstrates in higher education and Bowles and Gintis (1976) illustrate in K-12, it is important to begin an examination of student outcomes with the broader political and economic factors influencing the implementation and design of education. While it’s essential to examine the structural factors that influence the

consequences of schooling, it is equally important to examine the influence of individual action and their ability to act and react within these larger social structures as Paul Willis (1977) demonstrates in his book *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs*. Willis harshly criticizes structural deterministic arguments (such as those made by Bowles and Gintis), “[T]o quote the larger factors is really no form of explanation at all” (p. 65). Willis incorporates ethnographic methods and examines how through their resistance, “Kids produce themselves as working class. The mechanism is their opposition to authority, their refusal to submit to the imperatives of a curriculum that encourages social mobility through the acquisition of credentials” (Willis, Preface). Willis identifies how the everyday practices of individual’s replicates the social structure not through simple determinism as Bowles and Gintis demonstrate. My study incorporates insights from Willis by examining the practices of online teachers, while framing them in the larger economic and political factors.

First my research will incorporate insights from Noble’s research on the history of correspondence courses and the impact of the political and economic factors driving the implementation and practices. Second, my research will incorporate insights from Bowles and Gintis’ research on the structural determinants of inequality reproduction, specifically the impact of higher education funding on online course implementation and practices. Finally my research will incorporate insights from Willis and Cuban by examining everyday practices and the structurally constrained choice of teachers. I propose to study online classes from both the structural factors shaping the implementation (educational policy, and goals, education budgets and school organization) and the everyday constrained practices of teachers.

The popular focus of the online educational research on the consequences of this practice at the classroom level simplifies the broader historical, political, economic, and institutional factors that constrain the actions and consequences of an online course. I argue that in order to understand the consequences of an online course for students and teachers utopian, dystopian and utilitarian explanations at the course level are too simplistic. Thus, to understand the possible consequences of online education it needs to be examined both through a complex analysis of the economic, political and institutional factors pushing the implementation, and an examination of the teacher's own practices through this situationally constrained choice.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study will incorporate ethnographic methods to investigate the political, economic and organizational factors that may influence the situationally constrained choice of an online teacher. The online teacher will then become the central focus of the study to thoroughly understand the taken for granted assumptions and practices that may be emblematic of the ways in which these systemic factors influence teacher practices and possible student outcomes in an online course. More simply stated, this study seeks to identify the ways in which broader factors such as higher education budgets, policies and technology resources impact what teachers do in the classroom, while investigating the everyday practices of teachers that may challenge or reinforce those opportunities and constraints created by the systematic variables. My central research questions are:

- 1) How does higher education accreditation impact online education implementation and practices in the online classroom at Community?
- 2) How do higher education budgets impact online education implementation and practices in an online classroom at Community?
- 3) How does Community's technology department impact the implementation and practices in an online class?
- 4) How are teacher's practices in an online class impacted by these systemic factors in their course construction and maintenance?

For this study an online course is one that takes place entirely on Blackboard. As an online teacher one may not see the connections with the broader political, economic and organizational factors influencing what happens in his/her classroom, this study is designed to make the subtle visible and map out the broader domains of influence

Research Site

Community (*a pseudonym) is used throughout the study. Community is a two-year technical college located thirty minutes outside of a medium sized metropolitan city in a small town, Reedsville,* with a population less than 20,000. Reedsville is a solidly middle class town with poverty rates less than 3% and a median household income in 2009 of nearly \$90,000 (Citydata, 2012). Community has an enrollment of over 26,000 students, with nearly 8,000 being associate degree seeking. The mean age of the student body is 26 and the ethnicity breakdown is less than 10% minority.

There are a few reasons why Community was the selected site for this study. Firstly, and most importantly, ethnography encourages the use of an insider's perspective and I have been employed for over 11 years at Community as an instructor who teaches both traditional, hybrid and online courses. Thus I feel that I am in an optimal position to provide an understanding and critique of my informant's perspectives. I understand the problematic of potential bias from an insider perspective and would argue that being conscious of this possibility will reduce the risks. Secondly, Community is part of the 2-year public college system which has embraced and incorporated online courses more than any other higher education institution, so it may in some ways provide some transferability to other two-year education systems (Sloan Consortium, 2010).

The number of internet courses offered every semester at Community in general education nearly matches the number of in-class options, which reflects the reported zeal for incorporation at this level; however, the online and accelerated courses have nearly a 50% drop rate which conversely evidences common criticisms. As an institution, Community is in a situation that has two competing goals, do we focus on courses that

transfer to the four-year system or technical classes that focus on job training?

Community also has pressure towards offering more online course options because of increasing student enrollments and lack of adequate classroom space.

In the fall 2010 semester, Community experienced the highest enrollment in its history. One response to this enrollment increase has been to increase the number of online course offerings every semester. Since the returning, full-time employed, nontraditional student is the target of much of Community's marketing campaigns these students have embraced online learning as a convenient way to obtain a degree in their already busy lives.

Recently, there have been major political and economic changes occurring at Community because of the state budget cuts for higher education and the loss of union rights for state employees. Community will endure a \$70 million funding cut over the next two years and is undergoing massive transition as the teachers no longer have a contract. These factors will undoubtedly impact what happens in all classes at Community, including those which are online.

Research Domains

I began my study by examining the larger political and budget factors that impact the institution. Then I studied how the organization responds to online course construction and maintenance with resources and training. Lastly, five online teachers were interviewed to understand and elaborate on how the situational factors can create opportunities and constraints for their online course implementation and practices. I assumed, of course, that there would be some differences between the views of the administrators and teachers, and between the larger policies and organizational practices.

My goal, in short, was to gain a better understanding of online courses from policy implementation to everyday practice.

Political Influence: Accreditation

My first area of proposed study was the political influences guiding the implementation and practices in online courses at Community. This required an examination of the higher education policy as it specifically relates to online education accreditation. I investigated archival data via the internet on higher education policy as it relates to accreditation and college practices in online courses. I was specifically looking for policies that affect online education implementation and practices. This required an examination of the North Central Association for Colleges and Schools accreditation policies as well as the school's organizational policies with online education. These policies served as the foundational framework for comparing the local implementation and practices. After the framework was established I examined how the institution manages and negotiates these broad guidelines.

In order to understand how the broader higher education policy influences the implementation and practices at Community in online courses, I conducted one semi-structured interview with the Vice President of Learning. The individual in this position is responsible for overseeing the college's successful accreditation. This individual is responsible for translating higher education policy into practice and assuring that Community is in compliance with the guidelines.

The goals of the first interview were to map out the higher education policy as it relates to online education and secondly to gain an understanding of how Community translates those policies into practice. I wanted to gain an understanding of the national,

local and organizational policies that influence online course implementation and practices. Below are my primary questions for the first interview:

Vice President of Student Learning

- 1) What are the federal/state higher education accreditation policies that affect the implementation of online classes?
- 2) What are the federal/state higher education accreditation policies that affect the practices in an online course?
- 3) How does Community implement these policies?
- 4) What mechanisms do you have in place to know that these policies are being followed?
- 5) Do you see any possible difficulties for teachers and students in an online class as a consequence of these policies?
- 6) Can you think of any positive policy changes that could impact online course implementation and practices?

After the first interview was transcribed I mapped out the domains of the broader education accreditation policy that impacts online education. This placed me in a better position to ask more specific questions about the policy factors perceived to have real consequences in the classroom. I remained open of course to interviewing other informants with unique knowledge as they are identified. My focus remained on how education accreditation policy gets translated into practice at Community.

Economic Influence: Budgets

My second area of research interest was higher education funding and budgets as it relates to implementation and practices of online courses. This required an

examination of changes in higher education funding, financial aid and online education at the school level. This also involved an examination of the most recent changes in the funding of higher education and state funds allocated according to the new budget.

I looked specifically at how these economic push factors influenced online course implementation and practices. This was done through interviews. I conducted a single interview with the Senior Business Manager. This individual had unique knowledge regarding the impact of federal and state budget changes on both the offering of online options as well as student requirements for financial aid as it pertains to online courses.

The goal of the first interview was to map the changes in Community's budget and how that is related to online course implementation and practices, and to map the domains of how economic policy affects students taking online courses. Below are my primary questions for the first interview:

Senior Business Officer

- 1) What are the higher education funding policies at the federal and state levels that impact online education directly or indirectly?
- 2) How does Community make the decision to offer an online class?
- 3) Are there financial aid policies that affect a student's ability to enroll in an online class?
- 4) What are the recent budget changes that affect online education?
- 5) Do you see any budget or financial aid factors that affect online courses?

After the first interview was transcribed I mapped out the domains of the broader budget factors that impact online education. Again, I was then in a position to ask more specific questions about how the budgetary factors had real consequences in the online

classroom. I remained open to including other informants with unique knowledge on the economic impact on online classes as they were identified.

Organizational Influence: Teaching Innovation Center

My third area of interest was the technology resources at the college. This gave me insight into the organization's influence on the implementation and continued practice of online teachers. This required an assessment of the technological resources available to teachers. These data were gathered through interviews. I was interested in understanding Community's incorporation of technology over time as well as the current resources available to online teachers. The Blackboard administrator at Community oversees all the administrative tasks with online course implementation as well as teaches all the faculty development training courses for Blackboard. I conducted four semi-structured interviews with the Blackboard Administrator regarding Community's implementation of online courses and resources for institutional support provided to both teachers and students. This individual had unique knowledge regarding the schools technological evolution and foundation for online course construction and practices. The goal of the first interview was to gain a better understand of Community's history of technology use and current resources for online instructors and students. Below are some examples of first interview questions:

Blackboard Administrator:

- 1) What is Community's history with technology-the IT department?
- 2) How are individual teachers chosen to teach an online course?
- 3) What kind of support is offered to teachers and students enrolled in an online course?

- 4) What are the biggest challenges you have to carrying out your job effectively?
- 5) What do you see as the challenges faced by teachers and students in an online class?
- 6) What would help you the most to do your job effectively?

After the first interview was transcribed I mapped out the domains of the broader technology resource opportunities and constraints that impacts online education. I was then in a position to ask more specific questions about these factors and their real consequences in the classroom. I remained open to including more informants that may have specific knowledge pertaining to the technology resources at Community as they were identified.

Teachers' Situationally Constrained Choice

My last area of research interest was the situationally constrained choice of online education teachers. This required an examination of teachers' taken for granted assumptions as well as their reflection on the political, economic and organizational influences affecting their everyday practices. I conducted four semi-structured interviews with each of four general education instructors about their online classes.

For the purposes of this study, only completely online courses were included. Some included synchronous and asynchronous components, some included rigid due dates and others were self-paced, all were be completely online. The requirements for the selection of the general education instructors were as follows; I selected two online instructors that have been defined as "exceptional" by department perception and dean recommendation as well as two online teachers that were defined as "in need of mentoring." Exceptional online teachers were determined by; associate dean assessment,

student evaluations, peer perception and demonstrated leadership in online education. The associate dean had publically endorsed two online teachers as the leaders in online education in the college. There are several online teachers who are active on college wide committees promoting online education best practices. These instructors were utilized as the “exceptional” informants. The online teachers “in need of mentoring” were chosen by associate dean assessment, student evaluations, peer perception and those instructors who are being mentored to improve their online courses. The reason for choosing these two groups is to compare and contrast some of the situational factors that may be influencing what happens in online classes. What is different, for example, in the situations of the “exceptional” online teacher and the one “in need of mentoring?”

The goal of the initial interviews was to understand the instructor’s background and experience as it relates to teaching online, and the training and resources offered to them at Community. More simply, what was their experience in becoming an online teacher? Here are some initial sample questions:

Online Instructors: First Interview

- 1) How long have you been teaching online?
- 2) How were you recruited to teach online?
- 3) What kind of formal/informal training did you receive from Community to prepare you to teach online?
- 4) What did you do on your own to prepare to teach online?
- 5) What resources do you have available to you now to assist with online teaching?
- 6) What were the biggest challenges initially adjusting to teaching online?

After the first interview was transcribed I mapped out the domains of the perceived opportunities and constraints. The opportunities are the capital or resources available to become an online teacher and the constraints are the lack of these same factors. The goal of the later interviews was to elaborate on these opportunities and constraints as well as asking the teacher to reflect on their beliefs and responses to these situational factors. More simply, what occurs in their class and how may that be related to the situational factors?

Online Instructors: Second Interview

- 1) Explain to me what you do in your class. Can you show me your syllabus and explain what is expected of your students throughout the semester?
- 2) You have been identified by peers, students and superiors as an exceptional online teacher. Why do you think that this is?
- 3) What could be done to help everyone be more “exceptional” online teachers?
- 4) Are you aware of the high dropout rates in online courses?
- 5) Why do you think this is?
- 6) Is there anything Community could do, in your opinion to lower these rates?
- 7) What are the dropout rates in your online class?

After the second interview was transcribed and I mapped out the domains of exceptional online teaching I prepared questions for the third interview. I followed the same procedure for the fourth interview looking for elaboration on beliefs and practices as well as taken for granted assumptions of online instructors related to their situationally constrained choice.

Those instructors that were identified by the department as “in need of mentoring” are typically instructors I have worked with in the past. They were told that are being selected simply because they are online teachers.

I was open to including other informants that have pertinent knowledge regarding the selection of online teachers. For example, it became beneficial to meet with the associate dean since they are the ones that actually assign classes and to confirm the selection of “exceptional” and “in need of mentoring” online instructors. I also attended some advisory committee meetings on online retention. These meetings were open to the general public. I also interviewed a single part-time instructor that was defined as “exceptional” by the associate dean.

Data Collection Strategies

I began the research by conducting an internet search regarding the history of Community. I was able to find the most recent information about Community from their website. After I established the history of Community and the site as it is today I conducted an internet search regarding higher education policy and accreditation as it relates to online education specifically. I researched the federal accreditation policies as well as the specific policies related to Community, based on their accrediting institution. I also researched the changes in higher education policies and goals to situate Community in a broader political context.

Next I conducted an internet search to locate and examine higher education budgets nationally and locally at Community. Most of this was done via internet examination of federal and state funding practices. I also did a historical analysis of changes in higher education budgets.

This background data regarding the history, policy and budgets was collected prior to interviewing informants. This gave me a better picture of the institution before I crafted the questions for the interviews.

Interview Protocol

All research informants were contacted initially by email. If they agreed to hear more about the study I requested an appointment with them to discuss my research and their willingness to participate. In the meeting I explained the focus of the study and asked them to read the informed consent. I requested to record all interviews. If the individual was willing I had them sign the informed consent form and scheduled interviews according to their availability and the location of their convenience. In order to protect confidentiality, the signed informed consent forms were kept in a locked drawer in my office at Community. Informants were identified by a number only. I recruited more instructor informant's than needed for the actual study to account for drop-outs.

During the interviews I asked the informants for any resources that they could give me regarding their unique knowledge pertaining to online education implementation and practices. All interviews were transcribed and kept on a password protected laptop to protect confidentiality.

Theory

The design of this particular study was strongly influenced by Noble's (1998) insights on the commodification of education and the economic and political influences that shape the design and inevitable outcomes of a course. Noble discovered through his

historical analysis of correspondence courses that the design of these courses created the negative results he found, high student drop rates, high number of failures, and lower quality education as defined by other faculty and the public. Noble argued that the economic and political influences at the time almost guaranteed these negative results. In short, these courses were by design encouraging failure by directing money towards enrollment and marketing and not curriculum and teachers. Noble's insight led me to question the current economic and political influences guiding the implementation and practices of online courses at Community. Does the design of these courses encourage success or failure? It appears that the nearly 50% drop out rate speaks to the flawed design, but I was curious to know about the 50% who are succeeding. What is different in these classrooms? Using a structural-functional sociological perspective, like Noble, I mapped out the structure and functions of the policy, budgets and organizational influence as it pertains to online course construction and practices. What is the policy design? How is that design operationalized and functioning at Community?

Bowles and Gintis' (1976) examination of the importance of economics influencing student outcomes will be incorporated by examining higher education budgets and policies related to an online course. Though Bowles and Gintis focused on income as influencing student outcomes, the larger insight was schools reproduction of social inequality. With this social conflict perspective I will examine the impact of budgets on the construction and practices in an online class. The site chosen may have some broad connections with reproducing social inequality, but the push factors in online course construction combined with the students selecting these options may provide some micro insights into this larger relationship. What is the budget design? How is it

operationalized and functioning at Community? Who benefits and at whose expense as a consequence of this budgetary design?

Cuban's (1984) contribution of the teacher's situationally constrained choice will be utilized to examine the constrained choice of online teachers as a consequence of the larger economic, political and organizational factors. Cuban examined the use of technology by teachers as influenced by the broader, specifically school organization factors. He demonstrated that the influence of the school affected what teachers did and were able to do with technology in the classroom. This is the central question of my study, how do the broader systemic factors influence what teacher's do and can do in an online course?

Data Analysis and Coding Strategies

This study examined online education from both the political and economic policy analysis and inside the school and the course by incorporating ethnographic methods. The study incorporated emergent design and allowed the categories to develop based on the informant's responses. The analysis of the interview data included breaking down the data (categorizing), and mapping the political, economic and organizational domains that provide opportunities or constrain for what occurs in an online course. The responses were first categorized under large themes of political, economic, organizational and teacher's situationally constrained choice. Under each of these themes, more specific categories emerged from the interviews. Under political influence the goals of Community became the central theme. Under the economic category, enrollment, retention, teacher pay and course loads became organizing themes. Under the

organizational theme emerged course copying and role of the TIC. Under the situationally constrained choice of teachers emerged all of the above categories.

Next, relationships were explored (contextualizing) by looking at the bigger picture influence of political, economic and organizational influences within each of the emerged categories. Finally, reflecting on the data involved examining and displaying the theoretical connections and the possible insights that were gained from my research findings, that the systemic practices at Community were encouraging the implementation of the easiest course possible, a model that closely resembles Nobles (1998) *Digital Diploma Mills*.

After the initial interview I transcribed them. The interviews regarding policy, budgets and organizational factors had two purposes; map out the structure or design and looking at the functions. After I had a basic idea of the structure and consequences of these factors, I designed more specific questions for the second interview that elaborated on the structure and function and how this created opportunities or constraints for the implementation and practices in online courses. I was correct with the assumption that the administration would have one perspective regarding the structure and functions of the policy, budgets and organization and the teacher's had another.

The interviews with the teachers were an important focus of this study. Broader factors influenced the teachers situationally constrained choice, so I needed to know what those factors were. The interviews with the teachers were transcribed. First I was looking at their background and socialization into online teaching. Then I focused more on the conflict analysis of differences in opportunity based on systemic factors. What do the teacher's do in the online class? How is this related to the broader policy, economic

and organizational factors? The teacher's were able to talk very specifically about their design and practices; I made the broader connections with theory. In later interviews I asked more specific questions regarding the broader factors that influenced what they were able to do and not do in their online classes.

The purpose of this study was exploratory, to understand the broader political, economic and organizational factors that guide the implementation and practices in an online course at Community. Secondly, the teacher's discussed what can and does occur in their online classrooms as it relates to these broader influences. The goal of this study was to fill in some of the gaps in current online education research that focuses mostly on outcomes related to delivery method alone. This research sheds some light on the broader circumstances that impact not just online course construction but student outcomes related to situational opportunities and constraints. Research findings were shared with informants and Community as requested by them. This research has the potential to have a positive impact on student outcomes in an online class at Community. Classical sociological paradigms provided a beneficial context for posing questions as well as examining the results that emerged from this study. Peter Berger (1963) explained the sociological perspective most simply as, "seeing the general in the particular." It's the ability to recognize the broader social factors such as; history, culture, economics, politics, family and religion that shape our lives as individuals. The sociological perspective allows one to oscillate between the structural arrangements and understandings and our personal lives. I applied this type of analysis to online courses at a two-year technical college.

The structural functional paradigm in sociology is a framework for building theory that examines how something is designed and what are the functions and dysfunctions of that design. This perspective views society as a system of interrelated institutions that can only be understood by examining them in context. Noble (1998) utilizes a structural functional analysis to examine correspondence courses and argues that when studying the impact of any educational practice what is most essential is investigating the broader systemic factors, political and economic, which are driving the implementation and practices. Most simply the questions of the structural functionalist are, “How is it designed?” and “What are the effects?” Online courses can have many different outcomes for students because there are larger political, economic and organizational influences that guide the implementation, practices and ultimately consequences. It makes more sense to frame the discussion about online course outcomes not on the end results, but on the systemic factors shaping the design and practices.

IV. RESULTS

Between January and June of 2012, I conducted 24 interviews with instructors and administrators at Community in an effort to uncover the economic, political and organizational influences that may shape teacher's situationally constrained choice in an online class. My central research questions were:

- 1) How does higher education policy impact online education implementation and practices in the classroom?
- 2) How do higher education budgets impact online education implementation and practices in a classroom?
- 3) How does the funding of schools impact online course development and practices?
- 4) How does a school's technology department impact the implementation and practices in an online class?
- 5) How are teacher's practices impacted by these systemic factors in their course construction and maintenance?

What the research uncovered is that higher education accreditation and direct budget allocation to online courses are not the political and economic driving factors. Rather, higher education accreditation was an after the fact hurdle; the budget allocations are dictated by department enrollments, the technology department operate on the periphery and the teachers are unclear about their role. If the teacher defines "best practices" as retention, they are encouraged to offer a correspondence based course. If a teacher defines "best practices as "academic rigor" they encounter constraints from the college.

All the interviews were approximately an hour in length; most were recorded and transcribed before the next interview to assist in developing further questions. They were not recorded if the informant was opposed. Besides interviewing, I also spent hours observing advisory committee meetings related to online learning as well as attending brown bag “lunch and learns” and scheduled Blackboard training days. I also sat in on book studies related to online learning and asked instructors to tell me about their online courses. Again, all names have been changed to protect the informant’s identity.

Political Influence, Higher Education Accreditation: Sally

Initially I hypothesized that the head of accreditation would have the most insight into the political factors influencing implementation and practices in an online course. I assumed that since higher education policy makes requirements for course outcomes that this policy may be influencing the implementation and practices in an online class. I couldn’t have been more wrong as I quickly discovered after only one interview. To my surprise, higher education accreditation is often an afterthought, not part of the design of an online course.

In order to examine possible political and policy factors driving the practices in an online course I began by interviewing the Vice President of Student Learning, Sally. She met with me over her lunch break in the school cafeteria. It is Sally’s job to oversee the successful continued accreditation of Community. She has been at Community for 13 years. Sally is nearing retirement and had a relaxed and jovial attitude about talking with me. Since she is part of administration, she is dressed much more formally than I am. The accreditation agencies, in theory, provide the guidelines for the colleges academic practices. After talking with Sally, the reality that became apparent is that accreditation

requirements were something completed after the fact and viewed as simply a lot of paperwork to “prove” what is already being successfully accomplished at the college. The regional accrediting agency for Community is the North Central Association for Colleges and Schools. The national umbrella agency is the Higher Learning Commission.

I asked Sally specifically about online education accreditation. She explained to me that, “the Higher Learning Commission provides guidelines for distance delivery, but essentially they just require that online courses be comparable to traditional class offerings.” After reading through the documents Sally gave me on accreditation, according to the Higher Learning Commission, there are nine guidelines for successful distance education: on-line learning is appropriate to the institution’s mission and purposes, the institution’s plans for developing, sustaining and if appropriate expanding on-line learning offerings are integrated into its regular planning and evaluation process, it is incorporated into the institution’s system of governance and academic oversight, curricula is comparable to traditional instructional formats, the effectiveness is evaluated, faculty are appropriately qualified and effectively supported, academic services are available to support students, sufficient resources are offered to support on-line learning, and finally, and the institution ensures the integrity of its on-line learning offerings (Higher Education Commission, 2010). Sally shared with me, “So, as long as we as an institution can prove we are doing these things, we are on the right track.” I commented that the guideline seemed so broad, which likely offers the college’s considerable leeway in meeting the criteria. Sally agreed and continued,

That is why it's seen as after the fact. For example, we should already have practices in place to support faculty and students, so the commission just requires that we show that.

After the first interview with Sally it became apparent that there is nothing being dictated by the commission that influences the practices in an online course. The political influence is not coming from the accrediting agencies.

Sally informed me that the commission is more stringent if a program is entirely online, but Community does not have any fully online programs. Furthermore, she continued that, "over 85% of the online courses offered at Community are general education classes." The curriculum in these classes is mandated by state competency requirements, not the accrediting agencies. There are no accreditation requirements for a single online class. Sally again reiterated,

The accrediting agencies don't really serve as watchdogs, we just provide them with the documentation that we are doing these things; it's a lot of paperwork. The real responsibility for our online classes falls on the associate deans and faculty, that's who you should speak too.

Sally's job is to demonstrate to the commission that Community is doing what is expected. Community has had no problems with accreditation for over ten years so they are given considerable autonomy from the commission. Both Dave (financial officer) and Sally (head of accreditation) encouraged me to talk with the associate dean of general education to address my research questions.

Economic Influence: Budgets: Dave

Initially I hypothesized that the school budget would directly impact the implementation and practices in an online course. I began this study with a single one hour interview with Dave, who is the lead financial officer at Community. Dave has only

been working at Community for two years, prior to that he was employed in the private sector. I met with Dave in his office which is located in the Human Resource department on the top floor of Community, which is symbolic of the administration's position and power. Dave met me at the door and shook my hand with a big smile. Dave informed me that he did not feel comfortable being recorded, and that it, "really wasn't necessary." I took notes and whenever possible wrote direct quotes. All of his responses were brief and matter-of-fact. He did not appear thrilled to be spending time answering my questions. He often glanced at the wall clock and provided responses with a condescending tone.

First, Dave began by explaining funding at Community. He said, "It really comes from just two sources; property taxes and tuition, with the majority coming from taxes." Dave elaborated by explaining that the appointed board at Community makes the large-scale decisions about budget allocations based on department enrollments. Community is different from other public colleges because they have a board that makes these decisions and not the state legislators. The departments are then allowed some autonomy in their budget considerations, so Dave argued, "there is really no place on the budget specifically for online courses." Dave did not believe that the budget of the school had an impact in any way on online course offerings or practices. Dave commented that because the school only makes decisions about department allocations, it is "the individual departments that make the decisions about online course funding." Dave said that most departments don't want to go online; it does not make sense for them. For example, he explained, "Our nursing students score second in the state on their exams; we are doing great in that area and it makes no sense to go online, same with truck

driving.” It does make sense for general education classes which is why Dave said that has been the department that offers the most because, “It’s easier to teach psychology online then dental hygiene.” According to Dave, the departments have some autonomy in offering online courses, but it makes “more sense” for the courses not related to practical skills.

Dave highlighted the fact that the general “direction of the college is more online options.” Dave said this is a consequence of both student demand and “keeping up with the times.” Dave recommended that I speak with the individual department dean’s to discover budget allocation for specific courses. Diverting from my original research design, I made an appointment to speak with the associate dean, but first I preceded with my original research questions.

Associate Dean: Lisa

Dave and Sally encouraged me to talk with the associate dean since she is responsible for departmental budgets and overseeing the quality of their courses. When I explained this to Lisa (associate dean of general education) she responded, “I have no time to investigate what is happening in an online class, I wouldn’t even know what to look for, that responsibility falls on the faculty.” Lisa has been the associate dean for nearly 20 years. She is responsible for overseeing 137 faculty and over 500 courses. Lisa is also near retirement. We met in Lisa’s office twice for approximately an hour each. Lisa’s office is not located on the administrative floor, but with her department and faculty. This is standard practice at Community. Though she is technically required to oversee all the instructors’ course quality in general education, she acknowledges that this is not possible, especially in her department. The general education department is the

largest department at Community because all students are required to take these foundational classes regardless of their particular program or major.

The quality of the online course begins in Lisa's opinion with the instructor. Lisa explains that, "students are really the ones who have been demanding online course options, so there is a pressure on me to open up more of them, finding qualified instructors (to teach online) is much harder." Lisa explained to me that the way that she gauges student demand is enrollment numbers. The online classes fill up very quickly and have large wait lists, so often she will open up another section if there are enough students. The online classes consistently have wait lists she tells me, so "just from that level I feel pressure to open sections".

As Lisa opens sections she sometimes has to approach teachers who have never taught online before and ask them to take a class. She explained,

A few teachers are really opposed to it and just tell me no, but most seem excited about teaching in a new format, but just because an instructor agrees to teach an online course, does not mean they have any experience in doing so.

Currently, Community only requires a single 5 hour Blackboard training session offered by the Teaching Innovation Center (TIC), for a new online teacher. This class includes the basics on how to navigate and use Blackboard. Lisa acknowledged that is not enough,

Sometimes I just need an instructor to teach a class and I am under stress and I have to put a teacher in an online class with no experience. Originally, it was just whoever was willing to learn it and do it.

I asked Lisa that since she is the one who makes the decisions about how many sections to offer online, if there is not enough trained faculty, "Why are they even being offered?"

According to Lisa,

There is a lot of pressure for us to keep our enrollments up. We don't have a program in general education; we don't offer a degree we are here to support the programs so as a department we always have to be showing our value.

I inquired, "How does a department show its value?" Lisa responds, "Through enrollments." She went on to explain to me that there is considerable pressure coming from the board and through the administration. Lisa explained to me, "There is a clear message to us that enrollments and retention are top priorities, especially recently." Dave explained that the, "new Wisconsin state budget cuts 70 million in funding from Community over the next two years." There is also a governor ordered property tax freeze in the state, so Community only has the ability to raise that revenue through increased enrollments and higher tuition.

Since the general education department needs to be viewed as a valuable resource to the departments (the degree granting majors) and the school is constantly putting pressure to increase enrollments, the general education department is encouraged to offer ever increasing numbers of online course offerings, even with less than qualified teachers with little to no oversight of the quality of these courses. Lisa said that she has to rely on the faculty to meet the state guidelines and maintain high levels of academic rigor in their classes. Lisa emphasized that it is "up to instructors to provide a class that follows the state guidelines as well as get the training that they need in Blackboard to be successful online instructors", which she feels the majority do, especially those exceptional online instructors.

After talking with the Lisa it appeared that the demands for enrollment (whether they are coming from students or the board and administration) don't always lead to a process of selecting qualified teachers or the creation of a quality course. Lisa, like Sally

maintained that the responsibility for what happens in an online course ultimately rests with the faculty. Lisa informed me that the “technology resources on campus are there for all faculty and students to get the help they need to be successful.” I continued with my research design and sought out an interview with the head of the technology department at Community.

Organizational Influence, Teaching Innovation Center (TIC): Ron

Originally I wanted to study the technology resources at Community to surface some of the internal opportunities and constraints that may be impacting the implementation and everyday practices in online courses. I conducted 2 one-hour interviews with Ron, the director of academic technology and curriculum at Community. Initially, I thought that the TIC would play an instrumental role in the implementation and support of online classes at Community.

In addition to being the head of technology at Community, Ron is also the director of the TIC. I met with Ron in his large office in the technology center at Community. Ron is a friendly man and was eager and easy to talk with. He had no concerns about me recording our interviews. First I asked Ron about the role of the TIC at Community. He explained,

Our role here is really a support role. We kinda facilitate the technology infrastructure for what is available for teachers to deliver for online courses. Blackboard is part of what we support, we provide the technical support and then the training to help faculty to learn how to use it and then we also provide some core training in teacher foundations, facilitation skills in terms of online courses so we do provide training that are more related to what it takes to be a successful online teacher. For students we provide support for them on using the technology tools and providing some orientation opportunities for them and then the help desk support.

Ron sees the job of the TIC as periphery, not as a guiding source for the implementation or everyday practices in an online course. It is evident that the TIC is certainly not a center on campus that is directing or dictating online course implementation. Ron explained that Community has a decentralized model in terms of managing distance learning offerings. Ron noted, as did Sally and Dave,

It is really up to the deans and associate deans what kind of course offering mix they want to have. It's different from some colleges, some colleges have a distance learning division that offers the classes there were problems with the department and it wasn't always closely aligned with what was going on in the classroom so it was almost like two competing functions. There are pluses and minuses to both models. The decentralized model really provides to the departments the opportunity to make those decisions. The associate deans want to be treated like entrepreneurs and leaders and allowed to determine what they offer and how they deliver it. We simply provide support. Hiring instructors and course quality? That falls to the department. So, all of those course management decisions are in the department.

A real advantage of this decentralized model is that the individual departments and online course faculty have control over their course content. A realistic risk though is courses being developed by a single faculty member and managed by technology "experts" not teachers. Community has discussed outsourcing all their online courses to Pearson's, it would be cheaper than doing it within.

Ron agreed with Sally that the responsibility for the quality of online courses falls directly on the instructors. However, the TIC could be a source of tremendous learning for faculty. Best practice research on online education is widely available and could be disseminated from the TIC. The leading organization currently is Quality Matters (QM), which provides a rubric and review process that reflects current research and national standards of best practice in online learning. According to their website, "QM is a faculty centered, peer review process that is designed to certify the quality of online and

blended courses.” There are three components to the QM process, these include: the QM Rubric, the peer review process and QM professional development. The QM Rubric for assessing course quality includes 8 themes: course overview and introduction, learning objectives, assessment and measurement, instructional materials, learner interaction and engagement, course technology, learner support and accessibility. The 8 themes are then broken down into forty-one specific standards designed to promote student learning.

Ron sees the TIC as offering support for teachers and students, but not specifically as it relates to best practice. What Ron sees as the biggest problem with online courses is not quality, or lack of organizational support or teacher difficulties, but the students’ lack of preparedness and motivation. He articulated,

We have a system in place, early alert that you probably know about. I don’t know that it is used all that extensively and I think it is very valuable, not to send the student in when it’s too late, they get referred early with help with an advisor. We have this decentralized area so we don’t know what the departments are doing about it because there rates are different and the college is concerned about it. There is really no overall ownership of the retention issue. We did have an AQUIP committee to look at the withdraw rates, it needs to be addressed. We are beginning to track why students are having difficulties for online students. We are asking them for their reasons given for difficulties. The big ones are personal issues, learning style differences. The interesting thing is its illness and poor time management and there is only so much you can do when there are variables outside the scope of the instructor or the college. Too much work shows up a lot. 50% is health and personal issues, things that impact the course where there is nothing we can do to change the circumstances that students are in. The other part of that is that I think students do not clearly understand the expectations or whether or not it is a good match, and we can do something about that and we have started too. Part of it is still on the student because if they don’t attend to the information that we give them, so part of it is self-responsibility to participate in the orientations and assessments, but the students who do that, do well and stay in the course. Well they are paying attention, they are engaged, they are motivated, and they do what they are supposed to. The bottom line is that it needs to be a partnership between us and the department to really make this stuff work, part of that AQUIP team is on the advisory level.

It is positive that there is an acknowledgement here from Ron that it's not necessarily all on faculty to secure retention. Students may not succeed in an online class because of outside personal issues, and it may be that online students have different barriers and challenges than those traditional students, which might be why they chose online to begin with.

From Ron's perspective then, the role of the TIC is to support faculty and students from the sidelines; the TIC is not in control of the decision making, course quality or the retention issues. Ron explained that he is working with the online advisory committee to address the problem of retention, because of a perceived "lack of student motivation" and "personal issues". Ron explained that this committee is working on the curriculum for a required orientation, which would be a 4-5 hour, in person, orientation that students must complete before they can even register for an online course. It seems ironic to me that online courses are valued for increasing access for students, but the only way to successfully retain students is to create barriers that weed out those perceived as unlikely to succeed. Ron stated that, "It's sad to say that you have to filter out those students who are not motivated and self-disciplined even to do some basic tasks as part of an orientation." The TIC oversees all the courses on Blackboard. Ron believes that the college administration "seems to be listening" to their concerns about the "rapid growth of online education" since there is pressure from administration to "retain while they grow enrollment". Ron noted that there are enough people raising cautions and, that for now, the administration seems to be listening. Although when the issue was pressed with Ron, he couldn't provide me with examples of how the administration was listening.

I asked Ron to explain what happens when an instructor gets a new course. He outlined that when they are informed of a new teacher for an online course they copy over the original shell for the course and send it to the new instructor. Ron elaborated that the original shell was likely, “the first person that created that course,” but in other cases the associate dean asks him to copy another instructor’s course when it was created by an instructor defined as “exceptional”. When I asked him why it was done this way, he said, “It just always has been. It’s easier for everyone.” Then I explained to Ron that teachers are sometimes just using that shell, and that the ones being copied don’t always have the permission of that instructor. He seemed very surprised by both these points but added, “The courses technically belong to the school if they are on Blackboard and instructors should be happy to share.” In 2011 a new Governor has ended public unions in the state. As a consequence collective bargaining contracts were nullified. These agreements had very detailed requirements for course ownership. Under the original agreement, only when an instructor was actually paid to develop a course does Community own that course. According to ARTICLE 28 Intellectual Property of the previous employee contract;

Materials created by an educator that are not separately compensated by work loaded additional assignment or a paid curriculum project, are the sole property of the educator(s) who created them (including all intellectual property rights thereto), except as the educator may otherwise agree in writing.

Currently Community has no contract of any kind and the administration is working on a faculty handbook that may or may not have different rules regarding course ownership. Whatever the case, it appears that the courses were being copied even while there was a faculty contract in place. As a member of the administration it is clear that in his opinion

those courses belong to Community anyway and with the lack of an employee contract, those guidelines are no longer established. (I discussed this issue later with the instructors).

Besides the issue of course ownership, there are underlying, taken for granted, assumptions involved in this practice, namely that all courses are pretty much the same and can just be copied from instructor to instructor. It assumes that all courses are the same and all instructors teach in similar ways. Certainly there are some common competencies in any course, but the issues of commodification of curriculum and de-professionalization of faculty becomes a huge concern, which the faculty will discuss later.

In summary, the practice of copying course shells is largely realized through the TIC. The organizational support (TIC) at Community for online courses is mostly at the periphery as a support for online teachers and students, with the technology. Though the TIC oversees all Blackboard courses, they have little involvement in the everyday practices of these courses. This could be seen positively, in that the teachers are controlling their courses. On the opposite side, the TIC could be offering curricular support on online best practices and pedagogy as well. In practice, the TIC defers that responsibility to the faculty. While it seems important for faculty to maintain control of course content, the TIC could perhaps be the center for promotion of effective online pedagogy. Interestingly, Ron views high drop-out rates and failures in online courses largely as a consequence of student issues.

Online Faculty

Initially, faculty members were to serve as my focal point to unpack the ways in which the broader political, economic and organizational factors may impact their situationally constrained choice in an online class. I tried to get at this with many different questions on best practices and the impact of the school.

Between January and June, 2012, I completed a total of 18 one hour interviews with 5 general education instructors. All instructors taught both online and traditional courses. These instructors were chosen because they were identified through informal communication with the associate deans and their peers as either “exceptional” online instructors or ones “in need of some mentoring”. The two “exceptional instructors” were full-time faculty and the two of those “in need of mentoring” were part-time. I altered my original research design by purposely seeking out one additional part-time instructor that was identified as “exceptional”. I was hoping to see differences in the practices of the instructors even though the systemic opportunities and constraints for them would be similar. Table 1 below summarizes the demographic characteristics of full-time and part-time instructors at Community pertaining to: course load, class size, pay, and semester duration.

What I discovered after hours of talking with faculty and listening to them in meetings and brown bag lunches is that they are overloaded, not being paid for course construction and unclear if their job is retention of students or offering a rigorous academically sound course, two goals they saw as incompatible at Community. When a teacher creates and offers an academically rigorous course, his/her efforts are constrained.

Table 1
Online Course Demographics

Online Courses	Full-Time Faculty	Part-Time Faculty
Course Load	Maximum 6	Maximum 3
Class Size	Maximum 26	Maximum 26
Semester Length	16 weeks	16 weeks
Pay	Salaried	Hourly

Exceptional Online Instructors

For the “exceptional” online instructors I was referred by the associate dean to Brian and Casey. Out of 30 online instructors in the general education department, Lisa only identified 3 as exceptional (I was the third). Both Brian and Casey have won teacher awards given by students and are the technology leaders in the department and school-wide. They facilitate many of the school wide training sessions on incorporating technology and both Brian and Casey are co-chairs of the faculty- run online advisory committee. They are also both active in facilitating “lunch and learns” about online teaching. They both possess technological savvy and are active with the administration in providing insight and guidance for the direction of online education at Community, even though they don’t always feel that they are listened too. Brian and Casey have both led faculty training during in-service days and have accompanied administration to online education conferences.

Brian and Casey have some similarities as instructors; they both feel overloaded and that they don’t have the time to devote to improvements in their online courses. The major difference that emerged is that Casey and Brian defined best practices differently. Simply stated, Casey saw it as retention and Brian saw it as academic rigor combined

with solid online pedagogy. Brian felt constrained to go above and beyond a simple correspondence-type course. Casey was in many ways already offering a correspondence-type course designed to create impediments. Brian had developed his course. Casey had received a copied course.

“Exceptional” Online Instructor: Casey

Casey has been teaching full-time, online economic courses for 8 years at Community. He is currently the co-chair of the technology advisory committee. Casey is seen by his peers and superiors as an extraordinary instructor with dedication to his students and the school as well. Casey has a formal demeanor and a level of professionalism that affords him considerable involvement with the college’s administration. He has served as the faculty representative on the board on and off for 10 years. I met with Casey four times during the spring 2012 semester. We typically met in the school conference room, per his choice. Casey felt really uncomfortable being recorded, but I convinced him it was for purposes of getting answers in his own words and developing better future questions.

I asked Casey how he first started teaching online. Casey told me that he was asked to teach his first online class by Lisa (the associate dean) and was, “excited to do so.” Casey is a self-defined “techie” and enjoys working with technology in his free time. He was excited about the prospect of teaching with technology. At that time, there was no formal training required for new online instructors at Community but Casey volunteered to attend a couple of Blackboard training sessions on his own through the schools Teaching and Innovation Center (TIC). Casey felt that his level of expertise with technology was quite high.

Prior to beginning his first semester as an online instructor, Casey attended some Blackboard training sessions prior to the beginning of the semester and explained,

I inherited a course. They just copied over the course for me and basically I followed his (the previous instructor) outline and methodology for the first semester. I got an idea of what worked and didn't work and then I incorporated more of my ideas as time went on.

As Ron had explained previously and several instructors reiterated, it appeared that this was the norm for teaching a new online course. Instructors are given a shell of the course that usually contains test banks and quizzes and was developed by a previous instructor who taught the course, Brian addressed some of the very real concerns about this particular practice at Community. I asked Casey to explain to me what he does in his online class that he believes represents best practices, since he was identified as an exceptional online instructor. I wanted to not only understand what the instructors were doing, but how the school was helping them or constraining their curricular efforts. Casey elaborated,

One of the best practices is that I have is a weekly discussion that students are required to respond to the topic by Wednesday and respond to two others by Sunday. Then I use APPLEA, which is interactive graphing which is provided by the textbook, that is students get the assignments and it gives them a way to plot an interactive graph, currently I can't do that on Blackboard. It gives them feedback on what they did and wrong, it's a very nice tool. It's made my job easier and the students liked it. It helps with their understanding. I used to do graphs on a paint program; I found that it wasn't helpful enough. I would give them feedback and they weren't reading it, now I just do APPLEA. Another thing I like is assessment quizzes from the test bank. Before the test they take a 40 question quiz on 9 chapters. They get feedback and they can re-take the quiz up to 2 more times so they can actually get a 100% I do that before each test. It assess where they are and it randomizes the questions each time that they take it. It shows what you need to work on. I take away double points if they don't do an assignment. Exams are online, however they must come to class once in the semester and take a graphing test where they have to sit down and draw the graphs. They have one on

campus exam where they have to show their ID, sit down without a book or anything and answer the graphs.

Casey requires his online students to either come to school or meet with him, via online chat, or they are dropped from the course. Casey's response initially raised a series of concerns about best practices. Basically, he was given someone else's course that uses quizzes, exams and graphing assignments provided by the text book publishers.

Discussions appeared to be the only interactive thing that Casey was doing. Casey is viewed as an exceptional online instructor at Community. It could be Casey's position in the school and technology savvy that affords him the view as an exceptional online teacher.

Casey revealed some other things that he does above and beyond the shell that he feels helps students "be successful", which is how Casey kept referring to best practices and student success not curriculum and pedagogy. He said, "I require them to come and meet me the first week of class." Casey believes this helps students become familiar with him and it seems to improve the communication in the course. Casey is flexible if a student makes the effort to make an appointment but cannot make it to campus,

I did have a student in Whitewater and I skyped with her, so if you can't meet face-to-face we can still go over everything, not a problem. I will work with them. Also I had a student working in Louisiana during the graphing test so he took it on Skype. So it can technically be all online. For me to know that this person is doing all the work I need to have it this way.

If a student does not make the initial meeting with Casey, they are dropped from the course. Casey has made the class into a hybrid and drops those students who do encounter difficulty in the first couple weeks of the course. This idea and practice of creating impediments for students came up over and over, for very different reasons.

Besides requiring the students to have an initial meeting with him, Casey also holds Sunday night review sessions via the internet. He uses web conferencing and answers any questions that the students may have. He said, "I picked Sunday nights since most students are home and can get online at 8pm." Casey also said that he encourages students to use his office hours and will hold them via phone or internet. He commented that, "students rarely take me up on my offer." When I asked Casey why he thought this was the case, he replied, "I think most of them really don't care. They think this is going to be an easy class and when they see that it's not, they just stop." Like Ron, Casey feels that retention issues are due to the students perceived level of motivation.

When asking Casey about what Community could do to assist in his implementation and everyday practices of online classes, Casey said, "Having any impediment for them to get in the class because that will weed out those students who are less serious and committed." The more I tried to discuss best practices with Casey and how those were helped and hindered by the school, the more he returned to creating impediments and student retention rates.

I changed the question for Casey from best practices to what the school could do to help him personally become a better online instructor. He believed that by decreasing his workload and allowing him more time to attend conferences and educational seminars he could improve his course. For Casey and other instructors the biggest constraints they felt was too heavy of a workload that allowed very little time for course improvement. Again, it must be noted that Community faculty have recently lost their union, and collective bargaining rights and no longer has a contract. As a direct consequence of this, Community has increased general education instructors workloads by one class. Full-

time faculty like Casey must now teach 6 classes with 25-30 students each. Casey feels that this is the biggest constraint that hinders him from improving his online curriculum.

He elaborated,

The 6th class is a killer. The reason that I am a little overwhelmed is all the committees that I am on. The hard thing with online, and I am human and sometimes just like students and think, oh I can get that later and I need to continually watch myself from doing that and give as much effort as my in-class. When it comes to software, I feel that is my responsibility. I think the school could give us more time and opportunity to share best practice ideas, like Brian and I try and do. I get my best ideas from conferences. And so if I could have more time at in-services, or I am not work loaded with six classes I can take time to sit down with people. Sometimes you just need to just sit back and talk with others about what is working and not working. It's needing that time where I can think and talk with others. Or encourage us to go to conferences.

As the school is responding to their largest budget cut in history, one of the responses has been to increase faculty workloads. In Casey's opinion, this is the single greatest impediment to him improving his online class. The economic constraints that were emerging were the enrollment pressures that Lisa was experiencing and the workload pressures that Casey was. For him best practices equals student retention, so for him the solution to better practices becomes keeping students out who are unlikely to succeed.

Casey said that he felt as if learning how to use the technology was, "his responsibility." He believes that he is very capable with Blackboard and does not need the type of assistance that the TIC offers. For him, the TIC is, "not designed correctly", which is why he is on the online advisory committee, to address issues such as this. Casey thinks that the TIC should be, "dictated by faculty, not the other way around."

In summary, Casey's first online course was copied for him. Casey has done some things that increase impediments for students so that his retention numbers look good. Casey has essentially made a hybrid. He feels that the college could help him

become a better online instructor by giving him the time to do so. Finally, Casey does not feel he needs the resources of the TIC as it is currently structured.

“Exceptional” Online Instructor: Brian

I met with Brian four times in the spring 2012 semester. Brian has been a full-time Psychology professor at Community for 8 years. Since Brian and I have somewhat of a closer relationship than Casey and I, he was more comfortable meeting in the campus coffee shop or student lounge area. Brian is seen as the best online instructor at Community by his peers and immediate supervisor. Brian received the peer award for best teacher in 2011 and the student award for best teacher in 2010. Brian is passionate about online learning and besides co-chairing the committee with Casey, leads a faculty book study group that reads books related to online teaching and learning. Brian has been teaching online for 7 years. Brian requested his first, online class, as opposed to being asked by his associate dean, as most of the other instructors were. Brian, unlike the other instructors, did not have a course copied for him but instead spent a considerable amount of time developing a course,

I jumped in without any experience, I kinda in part took my curriculum from in class and plopped it into an online and in part had these visions of all these interesting things that I would be able to do that I couldn't do in a classroom and I think what happened that very quickly I realized that having the vision and the time were not necessarily mutually supportive. I didn't really have the time so I kinda started the class with podcasts and blogs and other things that I thought would be fun and within the first month I kinda slowly backed off and it turned more into what was in the in-class and not a lot of other stuff.

Both Casey and Brian said that the only training that was offered when they began teaching online was a 5 hour course offered by the TIC on navigating Blackboard. Brian, unlike Casey, decided to not attend these training sessions because he felt his ability to

navigate technology was fine, and he didn't want to sit through 5 hours of information that he could figure out, "just playing in Blackboard". Both Brian and Casey eagerly accepted the challenge of teaching online, and felt they had considerable technological experience prior to teaching online.

Brian, however, unlike Casey, created his course from scratch. When he first developed it he was paid a small stipend for the increased workload. Brian discussed what he believed are his best practices,

Ah, they include lecture capture and web conferencing; I think it makes a huge difference if you have some sort of online presence with your students so basically having a live time when you can talk about the course. It's not required, but I record it. I show things like a video and power point and we can have a little chat with questions and answers. It really is my way of being able to, before each unit walk through the assignments that are coming due, talk a little bit about what I am expecting, answer questions, jump in and do a tour through the assignments. I use software system that is provided through the college if you find out about it. I purchased the camera and microphone, I do that at my home office because there is really no way that I could do that here, we don't really have the facilities for that.

So unlike Casey, Brian's best practices do not come from the textbook publishers, and are not based on creating impediments to weed out students deemed likely to fail but often from investing his own money in technology and resources in things that he believes will improve the course quality. Thus, whereas Casey focused on creating impediments for students, Brian discussed improvements to his curriculum.

Brian, like Casey, felt as if the largest constraint preventing him from online curricular improvement is workload and recognition. Brian elaborated,

All the visions and unique ideas that I have are all things that I have to find time to do because they are not work loaded or made easy and in a way you don't really get any recognition for it either. In fact, to me the more best practices that you put in your course the worse the retention is and because I find that not many of the students really want to learn so

sometimes I do a ton of work to make what I think is the kind of course for someone who really cares about learning would be excited about, and I feel like that what happens is the students who finish the course, I feel like they truly know the material but you get a lot that basically tell you very quickly that this is not what they expected that their experience with other courses was different so they drop or they fail or they stop doing the work. So then you end up doing a lot of really cool fancy stuff for eight students. And they are great students but its demoralizing to me.

In short, he does not feel that he has the time to improve his course and furthermore, the system in place at Community is one that according to Brian, rewards retention, not a quality course. As did Casey, Brian notes that the single largest constraint is time. But unlike Casey, Brian does not define student success in terms of retention but in terms of making a rigorous course that trains a student for higher order thinking. As a consequence of the situation that he was placed in at Community Brian said,

I wish in many ways that I had never taught an online course, it's sad to say but I really mean it. It's affected me as a teacher; it's affected my self-efficacy as a teacher it's made me feel some demoralization especially being someone that is trying to advocate for best practices at the same time knowing that there is this force working against me that is really pushing towards retention.

Thus, Brian like Casey feels Community is putting tremendous pressure on him in two ways: first by overwhelming workloads, and second by pressure from administration to retain students. He continued,

There is not any real evaluation of online courses. I feel like the only measure that is really being collected right now is retention and the message that is being sent right now is that more retention is better. There isn't really a strong message about pedagogy or about how rigorous our courses should be or learning that ought to occur. It's fluffy talk. I haven't had anyone watch me teach for probably three years now.

For Brian, then, what matters is the learning that takes place in his course, not the retention numbers. Brian has much lower retention rates than both Casey and the school overall at about 30%. As a consequence of this, many of the online psychology classes

are being offered to part-time instructors out of Brian's frustration and the actions of the associate dean. Brian experiences considerable constraints from Community as he attempts to offer a rigorous course.

When asked about the TIC and the technology services provided to online instructors, Brian responds that the technology support on campus "is ridiculous." The TIC, according to Brian, only deals with the "nuts and bolts" of Blackboard and deals with nothing regarding effective online pedagogy. Brian explained that the TIC is a separate entity that has no real involvement with online teaching, yet they set-up and maintain Blackboard in ways that often interfere with what teachers are trying to do. In a later interview Casey also touched on this commenting,

The TIC decided to shut down and update Blackboard the weekend before the final, it was chaos, it makes no sense, but they don't teach these classes so they didn't know that.

Thus, technology support services at Community seem to be constraining the best practices in online courses by a lack of communication and a mission that is geared solely towards mastering the technology. Brian explains his response to the technology support at Community,

I got really frustrated with the technology services here and kinda just blew my top one day and got very upset and went to a dean and shared how upset I was and they set up a meeting with the head of IT. In that meeting, it was as close to a fight as you can get, yelling back and forth. What was thrown out was, "Well maybe why doesn't faculty do something about this?" And I kinda said, "Yes, we will." I don't think it was expected, there is now at least a committee that is at least trying. I am still torn back and forth, I still have these moments where I regret ever getting involved because I feel like um, I feel like I've seen the forces working against the things that I value and it's demoralizing, seeing where things are going. I think that the quality of instructors varies widely. If you are someone that is pushing towards exemplary practices and academic rigor and a high level of courses, there are some forces even in the faculty that don't want that and fight against that. They really value

retention and being able to do anything that administration wants and I think that maybe that's confusing.

It was Brian's vocal complaints to his associate dean that resulted in the creation of the only faculty led committee on campus, the online advisory committee, which will be discussed later. For Brian there is a constant tension created by his desire to provide a rigorous academic course and Community's pressure to retain students. Clearly, for Brian, the issues are much broader than retention, but a reflection of Community's lack of clarity on their mission on dedication to assisting remedial students. Brian fumed,

The thing that I wish I could get and have asked for numerous times, I wish that I could get clarification of our mission. I would like somebody to tell me that the values that I hold are either consistent with or inconsistent with the mission of the college and not just some fluffy, wink, wink of course we want rigor, but pass em. I've kind of gotten in their face about this, they have this early alert program and I submitted half of the 27 last semesters and nothing happened. It is a way for the faculty to throw every student at them and see if they can help retain them. Not a single one was helped. So I have a lot of students that didn't succeed and most of them were from online classes um and yet we are still pushing retention. A lot of the problems that I submitted resulted in nothing, in fact if anything the advisors experienced the same thing that I did. They said, they don't return my calls, they don't seem that interested, this semester I've kind of gotten sarcastic with them. Wow this student could really use help if someone actually helped them can tell its irritating folks. To me if retention is important then they have to put things into practice that help remedial students. They are just expecting that we will be able to have an academically rigorous class, and when I say rigor, I just mean a class where you finish the class and learn the material. To me, that's minimal rigor. You can't do that when you have half of your students in an online class that don't have the tools or the resources or the motivation or any of the academic skills necessary to complete. They just think it's going to be quicker and easier for them to take that online class. To me, the worst students, who are not motivated to learn, those are the students signing up for online classes because they see it as less obstacles and the main obstacle that they are looking for is having to actually spend time learning the material. When I look at the classes where there is better retention that is what they have so I feel the pressure to just give up and join the get a lot of students that are fans of yours because your class is really easy club. Their bragging point is no one drops my class.

Here Brian uncovered what may be a key political factor driving the practices in an online course. First there is a lack of clarity on the goals of enrollment and retention pressures coming from the administrators and board versus the goal of a rigorous course based on best practices. Brian, like Casey, comments on the students he feels are attracted to online classes and why he thinks impediments are essential to ensure students are not enrolling in an online course for the “wrong reasons ” For Brian, this should always be about learning. Both Casey and Ron felt students selected online classes because “they were easier” or “to stay on their parent’s insurance”, or “live off of financial aid.” These seem to be taken for granted assumptions; however, they are not based on any documented evidence. At Community, many of the students have children, they work full-time, and they are trying to get a degree on top of their already busy lives. Given these factors, Brian wants to ensure the students are getting a quality education, Brian worries,

I’m teaching an intro to psych course this semester, it should not be online. If it is, it should have really rigorous enrollment standards where students can demonstrate higher order thinking skills to get in and want a rigorous course. From 20 students I have 6 left. I’m scared to death that they are going to look at that and say, you only have 30% of your class and yet I know my class is good. And the 6 will tell me that. There is no incentive and it is offered by some part-timers online and I know that it is just a correspondence course and it is just extremely easy and it’s just a check off and I’m compared to that and they might have 80% retention.

The pressure, as Brian sees it, is to retain students, which really means “make the class as passable as possible”. He does not feel that the class he is teaching should even be offered online, but did his best to make a rigorous course. In doing so, he lost most of his students.

Both Brian and Casey were asked what the school could do to assist them in improving their online teaching or courses. Casey and Brian are encountering the same difficulties; there is simply no time with their heavy course loads. Brian elaborated,

If I want to put anytime into being a better teacher that is my summer, my winter breaks and my weekends and evenings. There is nothing I can do on campus and I really feel that deep down, that is the way that the administration wants it; they don't necessarily see us as professionals. I don't think they have made it safe to think outside the box and try different things if you are worried about retention. All I'm thinking about now, is how do I make my intro online easier? Its demoralizing to lose so many students, it doesn't feel good. I feel really bad because I started the first intro to ethics and I thought I did a good job and the next semester they offered like 5 classes and gave them to part-timers and I feel like that just ruined it and the frustration with that is one reason why I've just asked to not teach that class again, because it has been watered down so much. If students are given a choice, rigor loses every time, learning loses every time. Online learning is attractive to a lot of students because it seems easier, and if retention is pushed it's only going to get easier.

So, according to Brian, Community is encouraging the easiest course possible because of retention and workload pressures, but also because of the lack of curriculum investment Community is willing to make by copying courses. He explains,

They just plop the classes online. To do online right requires a substantial investment in curriculum development and because we don't get that investment, 4 years ago you got a new prep, they stopped that and the assumption is that there is no additional prep. In my opinion, we shouldn't even offer an online class unless we can offer lecture podcast capabilities. We should have lectures linked to everything. Taking that out makes it a correspondence class and anytime anyone talks about how great it is they show you the ones that are doing the really great stuff, but they don't lift back the veil and show you what the majority of those classes look like. The rule is read the book and take the quiz.

It is evident that Community does not want to pay faculty for curriculum development. Consequently, they hand off copies to part-time faculty, who are not paid for curriculum work, but spared some prep time. When talking about the support system at Community Brian elaborated,

The TIC is totally backasswards, it ought to be a consulting firm. They don't know it, which is why the whole committee was started. They know the software works, but knowing how to teach it is very different. The analogy is like, I know Microsoft word so I should be able to write an essay. It should be faculty led. You have to have it ready before it starts, it could take a year. The direction is, the assumption is that faculty is not capable of doing really good curriculum so we need to hire more curricular specialists, instead of giving us the time to create high caliber courses. They want to create the class in a box. Take 1 class off our schedule, they would rather keep us teaching 6 classes and have a curriculum designer create a quickie canned course and make us teach those and we have continue to have the image as not professionals and they add more administrative jobs and that is really where things are going. If you look at these other places, adjuncts, faculty who are managers and the courses are classes in a box. There is no deep processing. What is scary is that some of the people in administration graduated from some of these places, so to me, we are consuming ourselves. The leaders are continuing to perpetuate the myth that true educators do not exist, that we don't know how to create our own curriculum; we don't know how to do assessments. Deep down, I feel like we are the dying breed. I wish I were 10 years older because I feel like I'm going to witness something really horrible. I'd rather retire and watch it from the sidelines. I went into education because I value learning. I think that what's really sad, I think that there will be great colleges that step up and the people that really need learning are going to have class in a box and those are going to be the poor people, and that makes me very demoralized. That is why I came. I don't think there is any support for the kind of teaching that I want to do. Here it's like we are hidden away.

The practices of the TIC evidence some of the concerns that Brian is raising. They copy a course for each new instructor, with the assumption that it's just a discrete package that can be easily handled by any instructor. In his view, this model for online classes becomes the correspondence course. These packaged courses are routinely passed-off to new hires. Brian noted that,

My online classes are just being handed-off to part-time instructors. They want it easy just like the student You have to build a curriculum, have best practices, test it out I spent a lot of time creating lecture captures and I was in the elevator and a student says to me, "I love your online lectures." They were not even in my online class.

The minimal organizational support at Community includes technological assistance, but no curriculum or pedagogy assistance. As for the economic influence it's indirectly through the heavy course loads and lack of proper organizational supports Brian adds,

Today I mentioned that we need more peer mentoring and that really is a best practice and the first thing to come out of an administrators mouth is, "That is going to cost money, it's cheaper to hire a curriculum specialist." It's not if you focus on quality. It's empowering. Take one class away and allow me to go coach and work with other instructors and each of us has a talent, make that formal, they wouldn't wanna do that. They would rather hire an army of six people.

As further evidence of what Brian described, I discovered that there is a new committee at Community entitled the Online Learning Technology Advisory and Alternative Instructional Strategies. Community's curriculum specialist (Jane*) is the head of this particular group. She has an MBA and appears enthralled to pursue "innovative ways to increase enrollment," as she is constantly touting in every school-wide in-service. In Brian's opinion, "She has no pedagogical knowledge and is very influenced by other sales people, reads books written by CEO's of these for-profits as education experts." In Brian's opinion, the ones making the decisions about online learning are completely misinformed administrators,

Board members who see a billboard on the side of the road or hear an ad for online education are the ones making the decisions. To me, con academy is what happens when nobody wants to sit down and do the research and everyone looks at the surface level. It's based on ungrounded assumptions. Wow, these schools are making a fortune and kicking our butt. It does not matter that their parking lot is empty or they are in the news every day for fraud. I feel like their marketing is so good sometimes that even we buy it so no wonder the students buy it. We are actually making a model here that fits perfectly with the for-profits. We are a bunch of stressed out people who are only thinking of ourselves.

Brian comments on this mismatch between the goals of the administration and the board and the goals of instructors who are trying to teach an academically rigorous course.

Brian is convinced that the economics are driving all of these constraints indirectly towards a for-profit model.

From their end they see the same things we are seeing. Higher education's institutions are becoming predatory its becoming for profit. They are fighting too and everyone that is in for profit wants to see us disappear so in a way we are fighting for our lives. That college that I visited in Arizona I forgot to say that it is the best public, for-profit institution that I have ever seen. I was actually stopped in a meeting and reminded, "Remember, how am I going to make revenue from this?" It's really about revenue deep down. They will use the word sustainable but it really is revenue. How are we going to make money? We need more students.

Brian believes that at the end of the day the college really is concerned with competition, enrollment and retention. He also believes it's the power of the board and the direction that they want the college to go,

Our board is appointed by the county executive. We used to appoint our own board, our sister college still does and they just gave the governor that right. When you look at who is on the board it's for profit educators, people who own staffing services, its people who profit from our graduates. Its people who want to take advantage of what we offer. The board has changed from people who cared about Community, like ex-graduates to people who have an economic interest in our students. They are wondering why this place is here. Phoenix is telling me that they can do it and we won't have to pay any more tax money and it will be highest bidder. They are coming here because they know that this place is going to go out for bid. This place could become Phoenix. The people involved with this rely on short-term memory and marketing. Ultimately the rich don't need education, the poor do. I don't think I would have made it in this world. Right now I really do have moments where I want to say screw it.

Currently the board at Community is made up of three prominent business owners, a bank CEO, and a superintendent. Brian felt that the direction Community is headed with online courses is worrisome,

Ron is the head of IT and has power in IT. In his mind it would be better if all courses were made by curriculum designers and he owned them and we were just puppet instructors, I'm serious, he has essentially said that. He thinks masters level curriculum designers know more than the

instructors here. Rather than treat us as experts, they are comfortable with us as delivery people, as the mailman, somebody else puts it together. They think that they can just interview us to put the content together and then they manage it, instructors become subject matter experts; they only need one of them. This is the model that some of these big online colleges are going too. Bring in that one person that knows everything, videotape his lectures and now you have your course, say goodbye to that guy and bring in some teaching assistants and now you've got your course. It's just an insult that somebody else gets the credit for this course and I could be replaced at any moment and somebody has everything that I did, that's wrong. I'm moving everything off Blackboard.

While Ron advocated for a decentralization model in his interview, Brian thinks that Ron just wants to have one shell of a course that is copied and taught by technological experts who are cheaper than teachers.

Deep down, I don't even know our real mission. If you go to them (the administration) they will give you fluff. If this school was really just about student learning, things would be different. To me this is a learning institution if it does not impact learning; it is a waste of our time. It has just accelerated in this last year. Deep down they think education is a waste of time.

Interestingly, Brian feels that in caring about student learning and voicing his concerns he is put in a vulnerable position at Community. He explained,

I am the guy who is against all this. It is essentially management versus faculty. Ron (head of TIC) tell the group all the good things about this and Brian will tell us all the bad. I'm becoming quiet. At times walking out of that today, now I feel really vulnerable because I am the only one right now being vocal. They could just eliminate me. And the only way to keep yourself safe in this market is to teach adjunct. Any semester I feel like they could let me go. The focus on learning is a headache. It is just a hell of a lot easier to just make everything as simple as possible. More people pass through and I am less stressed. We are screwed. When they start quantifying all this? Focusing on retention isn't necessarily focusing on quality. It's depressing if you care.

The political issues and subsequent power struggles at Community, then, are primarily about the mission of the school, the level where the decisions are taking place, and the practices that are encouraged as a consequence. Since the school is pushing for

enrollment and retention numbers without offering resources, support or recognition for a pedagogically sound, rigorous academic course, Brian is confused. What is he supposed to do in an online class? It appears that the message seems to be just “pass em”. Brian feels that the practices at Community resemble the for-profit model, where the curriculum is essentially pre-packaged and the delivery mode is a correspondence-type course.

Vice President of Strategic Effectiveness: Michelle

After my session with Brian and his frustration with the mission at Community, I requested a meeting with the Vice President of Strategic Planning, Michelle, to hear the official perspective from the administration. Michelle has been employed in various positions throughout Community’s administration for 10 years. Michelle has a PhD in Educational Administration. Currently her position puts her directly below the president. Part of Michelle’s job is to oversee the mission of the school both in the present and long-term. I made an appointment with Michelle’s secretary; it took about two weeks to get an appointment with her. We met in Michelle’s office, which is enormous, on the top floor of Community’s most impressive building, with floor to ceiling windows. It was intimidating, to say the least. Michelle agreed to have a single one-hour interview with me and had no issues with me recording the conversation.

I asked Michelle to first explain to me as simply as possible the mission of Community. Michelle paused and commented,

We are so lucky to be at this amazing institution, we really do it all. We serve everyone from student’s right out of high school to returning vets and displaced workers. We train students to become workers or prepare them for more education.

Michelle talked repeatedly about how much she values the faculty and students and how lucky everyone is to be at Community. The goals of Community are definitely about preparing workers as well as preparing students for more higher education. However, in recent years there has been much internal debate about the importance or lack of, in preparing students for more education. There is another 2 year college in the same town as Community that only prepares students for more education, so many at Community feel that the focus should be solely on technical education or job training. Earlier we heard Lisa (associate dean) mention how she must constantly make general education appear valuable to the college. I explained to Michelle that I wanted to discuss online education at Community and how it relates to the overall mission. Michelle replied,

We are really about providing both access and a quality education, and online classes do that well. We do have some high drop rates, but they are in line with all the other schools. It seems to be a student issue rather than a course issue.

On the one hand, I'm glad the teachers are not being directly blamed by Michelle, but in viewing the students as entirely responsible for the low pass rates in online classes changes little in the systemic practices at Community. It would seem that if Community blames students for the dropout rates in online courses, they would not need to take any responsibility to address systemic issues such as; enrollment pressures to accept anyone and open sections with ill-trained teachers, overworked teachers with too heavy course loads, no curriculum pay and unclear goals coming from the college. In theory Michelle believes online courses and Community offer both access and quality.

Since it was Michelle that brought up the issue of retention, I asked her to explain more about access and retention in online classes. I asked, "What do we focus on more at Community?" She replied, "We really need to focus on both equally. We want as many

students as possible to be able to attend Community, but also to succeed here.” I pressed a little harder and asked her, “What is Community doing to ensure student success in an online course?” to which she replies, “A lot of that needs to fall on the teacher since they are the ones closest to the students and aware of their struggles. We have this fantastic early alert program in place that faculty needs to utilize more to retain students”. Ron had also touted this early alert program while Brian had argued it does nothing, so it’s pointless. Michelle adds,

There is really only so much that we can do. We have the student help desk, we have training sessions for students, they can receive curriculum help from the learning place, so some of that success is really up to them.

Michelle acknowledges that it is the responsibility of faculty and students for successful construction and completion of an online class. She does mention the colleges attempt to provide support services to assist them.

Michelle informed me, as Ron did earlier, that Community is beginning to collect data on the students in online courses and “their reasons for stopping-out”. The real problem is that students don’t complete the work, not that they fail the course. As Ron shared earlier, usually students describe personal and health issues and not course issues for failing to complete a course. Michelle was not able to offer any real clarity on the mission at Community, but she was able to articulate the administration’s view that “student success” means “completing the course”. Certainly this is one mark of a successful class, but as Brian would argue, not nearly as important as providing them with a quality course. I asked Michelle if she was aware that, “there is really no oversight in these classes?” She explained to me that it is really up to the faculty and the

associate deans to ensure the academic rigor of classes. It appears that the administration and departments are not communicating with each other on these issues.

The course quality questions are left to faculty and associate deans, but the associate dean feels completely overloaded and not able to assess the quality of all their online courses. Furthermore, the deans are under tremendous pressure to open more sections even when they know the teacher may not be prepared. The faculty then feel pressure to retain students and without resources to improve course quality and student retention. While Michelle says that we need to offer access, quality and retention equally, the faculty and associate deans do not feel these are being supported equally.

Instructor “In-Need of Mentoring”: Emily

As a part of my original research design, I wanted to talk with both teachers defined as “exceptional” and teachers identified as “in need of mentoring,” as an attempt to uncover the differences and similarities that may occur between these two groups. The associate dean Lisa was able to easily identify instructors who she felt “struggle”. Initially, she said I could talk with, “any of the part-time online instructors”. In the general education department there are 17 instructors who teach online this semester. Most of them teach one online class and one face-to-face class. I selected Emily and Dan. The Dean informed me that these two instructors, “get the most student complaints”. Emily and Dan are both liked by their peers, but don’t necessarily have the respect from their peers or superiors. In the case of Dan, he is seen as somewhat of an inept teacher, and complaints are usually directed towards his lack of organization. In the case of Emily, it’s because students complain that she does not respond to them quickly

enough. I met with both Dan and Emily four times over the Spring 2012 semester for roughly an hour each to discuss their online classes.

When meeting with Emily, I only informed her that I was interested in discussing her online classes, not that she was identified as “in need of mentoring”. Emily was considerably more nervous to meet with me than anyone else had been and wanted to be assured that her responses would not be shared with her superiors. Emily knows me quite well outside of class, which is the reason I believe I received such candid responses. Emily feels she is a good in-class instructor, but she feels as an online instructor she was never given the time nor training to develop those skills. Initially, she wasn’t even given a choice regarding teaching online,

I have been teaching online for four years. I had been asked a few times by my associate dean to take an online class before I finally agreed to take one because it was the only way that I could get enough courses. I consider myself a good teacher, but I was completely unprepared to teach online. For me the biggest challenge is just that I am technologically retarded. I thought Blackboard would be more straightforward than it is and I have very little knowledge of its capabilities. When I have a question I either call the technology help desk or I go ask another online instructor, but boy that must look bad.

Unlike both Casey and Brian, Emily completed no training and does not view herself as tech savvy, which may be a real reason instructors are defined as “good” or “bad” online teachers. Emily was given an online course and has very little experience with technology. She commented on her fear of looking incapable in front of her peers, so she hesitates in requesting help. Emily felt that she had to take the online course for personal economic reasons. I asked her if she would have volunteered to teach an online course at some point to which she replied,

Probably not, I mean, it’s not that I’m anti-technology or anything, I just like teaching in-person. I don’t think it’s the same experience online. I

mean, it could be close I'm sure, but the amount of unpaid time I would have to invest to do that...No I couldn't do that.

This represents a major difference with the full-time “exceptional instructors who had volunteered in the case of Brian or eagerly accepted in the case of Casey. Emily also admitted that she has little to no technology experience, which is different from both Brian and Casey.

Similar to many of the other instructors interviewed, Emily explains how she initially inherited a course,

At first I was excited to teach online. I had visions of this class where I could try out some innovative things that I could not do in the classroom, but the first problem was my lack of skill with Blackboard. The first time that I opened Blackboard there was already a complete course in there, it had all been done by another instructor who clearly knew much more about Blackboard than I did. All I needed to do that first semester was figure out how to navigate Blackboard, which was not easy, lots of issues came up, which today I know are very common problems.

In Emily's case she didn't see any incentive to go beyond the course that had been copied for her. This practice, she explained, was a result of her lack of time, pay and perception of the purpose of online classes at Community. Emily echoed Brian and Casey concerning the pressures of teaching an online class so that students pass but also so it “pays off” Emily says,

The first semester was rough, there were too many assignments to grade, along with trying to stay involved in weekly discussions and comment on journal entries. I was spending considerably more time in my online class than my in-class and it still didn't seem to be paying off, the student's just seem to have a harder time getting it. The next semester I dropped the journal requirement as well as the 2 papers, my job was easier. I'm not sure I believe my in-class and online are the same class. I think my face-to-face is much better, the online isn't even my course, but the time required to learn the technology and incorporate my materials is just too time consuming, so I've left it and I do the minimum to get by. I would like to show the same movies that I show in class, but those are DVD's that the school owns and I don't even know how to go about doing that.

The real learning takes place with a combination of the readings, the lectures and the discussion and I don't think that can be replicated online, and if it could it would take so much more time, so what would be the point?

Emily does not feel she had either the time or assistance to develop a good online class.

When I asked Emily about any best practices she incorporates in her online class, she said,

I added some of my favorite articles, but really I would love it if um I could record my lectures like Brian or have someone to do the leg work of getting all the good stuff online. I don't have the time or get paid for that.

She was not able to elaborate on anything in her class that she would define as a best practice, which is interesting since she has high pass rates. For her, best practices seem to be related to the pedagogy and incorporation of technology. When asked, "What could Community do to create better practices?" Emily responds, "Pay us to create our course, educate us and pay us, and don't just copy the course unless that is what you are expecting of us".

After discussing what Community could do to assist her, I asked Emily what Community does that constrains her efforts? She elaborated on the constraints at Community but also what she feels is the promotion of the easiest class possible,

If I had questions I would have to go to the technology center, there is no one to help with best practices, again unless I do it on my own time, which at this point I am just not willing to do. Mostly I think that online education here is a joke and everyone is doing the bare minimum except a few teachers. There is almost no incentive, besides your internal motivation to put a ton of work into these classes. First you need to learn the technology, then you have to learn about online pedagogy, then you actually have to make the class. Or, you could just get one copied by another instructor. The school does not seem to care so why should I? And I teach at three schools to survive as an adjunct, I can't possibly be exceptional at all of them.

Emily feels that the school just expects her to use the copied course since it does pay you to learn the technology or improve the course. A course is just copied and you are then left alone to teach it. Emily is aware her class could be much better if she had the time, but she also has fear for her position. She echoes Brian's feelings about the real mission at Community,

There are so many things to do to make these classes based on sound educational practices, but I'm honestly not even sure that that is the goal. It seems from the design that the goal is to get as many students as possible in them and completing them, I still have not figured out why the goal is retention. There is almost zero assistance provided to the instructor unless they seek it out on their own. The more difficult I make the course the more the students complain, the more the students complain, and the more worried I am about job security.

She goes on to note that it's not just confusion of mission; it's also being worried about her job if students complain. The pattern seems to be at Community, the easier the course, the fewer the complaints. Emily elaborates on the issue of student complaints shaping her course,

The way complaints are handled at Community is so messed up. It seems as if the administration and student services cater to the student's demands instead of the teacher's policies and practices. I often feel undermined or as if I am not viewed as a professional and my job is to serve students. I am confused because I am supposed to be teaching a bachelor level class, but the students here do not seem as capable to succeed at that. They don't know the rules and they haven't had as much quality schooling, so I make the class easier, if I don't I'm worried about my job. I would probably fail half the class if I taught it the way that I wanted too.

Like Brian, Emily has concerns about the difference between her mission of providing a rigorous course and the institutions goal of retention, which often results in encouraging the simplest course possible. She notes that her course consists of quizzes, tests and a weekly discussion that she simply grades as completed or not completed. The course was copied for her when she started and the only changes that she has made have been

dropping some of the requirements. Emily says that she spends a considerable amount of time just answering student emails from an online class,

They email me every time they have a question. They don't bother to read the syllabus or the announcements. If they don't hear back from me in a day they are on the phone with the associate dean. Most of my time is spent answering student emails.

She feels as if she is being exploited by Community. One way to make up for that is,

I do the least amount possible. If I only spend two hours a week on the course, then I am making a fair wage. It's a canned class anyways and I feel like everyone knows that, so I would rather focus on making my in-class as exceptional as possible.

For Emily, the message coming from Community is clear, get students through and do improvements on your own time.

Another area of research interest is the influence of the technology resources at Community. Emily already explained how her course was copied from a previous instructor. When I asked Emily about the technology resources at Community, she said,

I don't have the time to go there. I call the help desk when I'm in a bind, like when a student gets locked out of an exam, but I can't attend a training session all day on a Friday.

Emily really felt that she was not given a choice to teach online. She has little experience with technology and had very little training. Emily admits that she does not have the time to be "training off the clock". In many ways, Emily and Brian are similar. They both discuss the desire to improve curriculum and offer a challenging course, but both feel that is not the real mission at Community. They are both concerned about job security. It's interesting that Emily is defined as an online-teacher "in need of mentoring" only for her student complaints about response time; she hears no complaints from her superiors on her pass rate. Emily's course is a correspondence type course

where students complete the materials at their own pace. There is very little interaction between the students and the teacher, or with other students. Emily is aware that she does the “bare minimum,” but does not feel Community offers her any incentive to go beyond that.

Instructor “In-Need of Mentoring”: Dan

Dan has been teaching at Community for three years, but only one year online. Dan comes across as disorganized. Recently there was a full-time position open at Community that Dan applied for. Part of the interview required a teaching demonstration to the department. After Dan’s demonstration, the department had a discussion about their concerns with his teaching at Community even part-time, based on his disjointed lecture. I was a part of this meeting. Dan means well and is liked as a person, which I believe is why accommodations are made for him that may not be made for other instructors. For example, Dan has been working with a paid mentor for two years now. I am not aware of anyone else in the department who has had a mentor for more than a semester. Dan is retired from his full-time job and works at Community to “stay busy.”

Dan was asked to take an online class a year ago because according to Lisa, “I thought maybe he would do better online.” Dan obviously struggles as an instructor so Lisa thought that the online format would be better for him. It speaks loudly about who is being pushed into teaching these classes. Since Dan is not perceived as qualified in the classroom, the response of the associate dean was to put him online. Most of the students complaints directed at Dan are that he is “unorganized” and “doesn’t make sense,” Lisa informed me. The format for online courses at Community requires that the entire

semester is up on Blackboard from the start of the semester; Lisa also knew that Dan's class would be a copied- over curriculum anyway, though she didn't share this with me.

Dan said that he was required to do a Blackboard training session and he went to the TIC a few times on his own to get assistance in Blackboard. Dan was also given an online faculty mentor (it was myself) who was paid for the time spent working with Dan. Dan said that initially he was, "really scared about teaching online," but his associate dean assured him that he would have a course shell when he began that would be mostly complete. Dan noted that the first semester, he just "left the class simply as it was copied" and "spent time adjusting to the online format." Dan, like Emily, admitted to having very little skill when it comes to technology.

Next, I asked Dan about what he thought were some of his best practices. Dan explained that he required all the students to complete the online activities supplied by the textbook. He feels that these, "really help the students to learn the subject matter." So far this practice is the only way that Dan has altered the copied course. At this point the course shell that Dan is using consists of quizzes, tests and weekly discussions. Dan feels that he has a good course and is satisfied with the content.

In order to uncover some of the organizational influences on Dan's practices, I asked him what he feels that the school does to help him be a successful online instructor. He noted that,

They have a lot of training sessions and a help desk where they are really quick to return phone calls. Umm, mostly I just need really to learn what I can do in Blackboard.

It's interesting to me that Dan sees his issues as technology related when the department consensus would be that Dan needs real assistance in the curriculum area.

When I asked Dan if there is anything that they could do to help him be a better online instructor, his response was, “I’m not sure what else they could do except pay me for additional training time in Blackboard.” Like Linda and Emily, Dan acknowledged that it’s difficult to spend so much time on a course when you are not being paid for it. However, Dan would seek out help with technology, not curriculum. Both Dan and Rachael admit to having very little skill with technology, which may be the reason they were both identified as the ones in need of mentoring. Lack of technological skill is more visible than curricular issues. They were also both asked by their superiors to take the online course as opposed to volunteering. Both Dan and Emily are part-time instructors; they are only paid for the hours that they teach. They are paid 1/3 of what a full-time instructor is paid for the same course. In many ways, they have even less incentive to go above and beyond outside the classroom.

“Exceptional” Part-time Instructor: Linda

After my interviews were completed with Emily and Dan, and the comments from the associate dean that “any part-time online instructor” could be an example of one struggling, I wanted to see if I could find a part-time instructor who was identified as an “exceptional online teacher”. It is interesting to note that statistically the majority of the online classes are going to part-time instructors, those with the least amount of time and no paid preparation.

I requested to attend the monthly advisory committee with the associate dean’s at Community. At this meeting I asked if they could refer me to an “exceptional part-time online instructor”. There was initially no response. This could be because they don’t know the quality of the online courses in their department, as Lisa alluded too, or that

they didn't define any of their part-time online instructors that way. The associate dean of the math department finally referred me to Linda. He said, "Linda is very eager to teach online and is always trying to do things to improve the course."

Linda has been teaching online at Community for three years. Linda agreed to have two interviews with me over the phone to discuss her experience as an online teacher at Community. She lives far from campus and does not make it there very often throughout the semester, so the phone was the only way she was willing to agree to the interview. Linda repeatedly commented on how, "busy" she was. It was obvious to me that she was talking with me out of a sense of obligation, because her associate dean had asked her too. In Linda's department instructors are able to select the classes that they teach. Linda teaches software and requested the online class since "it's easier for me to teach online because I'm taking care of my children and mom as well" Linda also informed that she works another nearly full-time job. Linda said, "The online class is something I can fit in."

Like Brian and Casey (the other exceptional online instructors), Linda by her own admission has a lot of technology experience, which is also why she chose an online class. She explained, "In my day job I teach the blind how to use Dragon software. I have a lot of experience with technology. I mean, I teach others, with handicaps how to use it." Linda informed me that when she volunteered to take an online course there was no formal training required but she voluntarily took the Blackboard training class offered by the TIC on her own time. Echoing the other instructors, Linda says she was able to get a copy of a previous instructor's course,

When I began teaching online I took it upon myself to contact the previous teacher who was retiring. I was able to use her materials; I don't know how I would've done it without that.

The other instructors reported that it was just copied for them. Linda, by contrast, sought out permission from the previous instructor, but Brian told me that it wouldn't have mattered if she hadn't consented, it would be copied anyway.

I asked Linda about her best practices for the course. Linda explained that the only thing that she created for the course that was not inherited are videos on how to use the technology. This was her sole example of best practices when I asked her about it. Like Brian, Linda has created these on her own time and with her own equipment. The rest of the course consists of the copied quizzes and homework assignments from the previous instructor and text book publishers. I believe the reason that Linda was eventually designated as an "exceptional" online instructor is because of her perceived technology savvy and not the content of her course.

I asked Linda if she had any suggestions for what Community could do to assist her with online class; she admitted that she was really "not aware" of what Community offers, and that she "couldn't ever fit in any unpaid training anyway." She added that, "I think if we were actually paid to create a course that would be the best thing Community could do. Or they could pay us to improve a course." Part-time instructors are technically paid for an hour of pre and post per week, but the pay is so minimal, that most part-time instructors feel as if they are only being paid fairly if they put in little to no pre and post time.

When I asked Linda about the difficulties with her online course, she revealed that she is just starting to have “worries about the retention issues.” Linda said that she has a drop rate of about 50%, and that she takes that personally. Linda noted,

I do everything that I can to keep students, I send them emails, announcement reminders when work is due, I’ll call them. Sometimes I just get no response.

Linda says that she “really does all she can to retain students” and spends, “a considerable amount of time” reaching out to those students who stop doing the work or are not passing her class. Linda acknowledged that the pressure to retain students is no longer just an internal pressure, but an external one coming from Community. Like Casey, Linda has added a minimal amount to her course. She has a 50% drop rate and seems to define best practices as student success, much like Casey. For Linda, student’s passing the course is evidence of her best practices.

Like both Casey and Brian, Linda feels the best support that Community could offer her is, “paying her to prepare her class.” Linda explained that, “there are really lots of things I would like to incorporate in my online classes. I would love to do a lecture for every chapter; I would need paid time to do that.” Overworked, busy teachers seem to be the norm thus far for online teachers. The indirect influence of workload and lack of clarity of mission came up over and over throughout the interviews. There has been an acknowledgement that Community needs a committee that addresses the issues related to online classes. This is how the online learning advisory committee was started.

All the online instructors identified as “exceptional (Casey, Brian and Linda) identified themselves as tech savvy. Both of those who were defined as “in-need of mentoring” (Emily and Dan) admitted to having technological difficulties. All instructors

felt the economic pressures of heavy workload, no curriculum pay and retention, though Brian and Emily viewed “best practices” as a rigorous academic course whereas the others defined it as retention.

Online Learning Advisory Committee

As stated previously, Brian and Casey (along with Ron) both co-chair the online advisory committee. I met with both Casey and Brian together to provide me with more information about the online learning technology advisory committee. Earlier Brian explained how the committee grew out of his frustrations with the technology services on campus. The mission of the committee according to Casey is, “to talk about and find out the best way to teach online, from faculty and as faculty we need this and this and this.” Basically it’s a conduit to administration. Brian elaborated,

We want to tell you the resources that we need. As opposed to this is what we have. It needs to be a group of faculty agreeing upon what is going to happen. For example, when they do updates to Blackboard, I don’t want it at grading period at the end of the semester, that one of the things that made us go crazy. Now we decide when updates will happen.

As stated previously, Brian and Casey are the co-chairs of this committee, Ron sits on the committee as a representative from administration. This is the only faculty led committee on campus, which makes it more “relevant to the issues” but “less heard by administration” according to Brian. The advisory committee meets twice a month to discuss all issues related to Blackboard. The committee positions are for two years; Brian says they really want to keep getting new people on the committee. This past year they have discussed the issues with Blackboard, the capabilities needed, training sessions on curriculum, requirements for online teachers and student orientations.

The committee is trying to be the leader in guiding online education at Community, but they reportedly are always going against the administration's concerns about money. Brian notes that when there are joint committees held with administration, "the concern they have is always money; not pedagogy, not student learning, cheapness". Casey is working on guidelines for associate deans to assist them in hiring qualified online teachers. This will undoubtedly help them make better selections, when they have that option. As Lisa said earlier, "sometimes we just need a teacher."

Brain and Ron are working on what will be a mandatory 5 hour orientation that students will have to attend before they are allowed to enroll in an online class. Though this will create a substantial barrier and likely affect enrollment, the committee feels strongly this will help success and retention. To date, the response of the college has been to go ahead and create it, but no decision if it will be designated as mandatory or recommended. This matters to the committee who really wants to focus on retention. If, however, the college's real goal is enrollment, this orientation could add as a barrier. Several of the instructors highlighted what they thought were overloaded students with a lack of motivation flocking to online classes. These students seem to be rewarded in "easy" courses like Emily and Dan's, but they don't succeed in the more rigorous courses that more accurately compare to the standards of a traditional course.

Ron is also working on things that can be created in Blackboard to assist instructors. He says, "We could have Blackboard flag students who haven't logged in for a week and email teachers so they can attempt contact." Again, however, more contact does not seem to be helping with retention as the counselors have discovered with the early alert system currently in place.

It would seem that the online learning committee is attempting to put a barrier in place to make it more difficult for students to take online courses. Their hope of course, is that his orientation experience will result in courses will have better retention while there is a faculty effort to promote and increase best practices in online courses that focus on rigor, these goals are constantly conflicting with administrations concerns about money.

Similarities and Differences

In summary, it was through the interviews with faculty and the associate dean that the indirect influence of economics: heavy course loads and lack of curriculum pay along with the politics; lack of clarity of mission, and organizational copying courses that influenced teacher practices to encourage retention. The major difference between those instructors identified as “exceptional” and those “in need of mentoring” seems to be reflective of their skill with technology, since there is really not any oversight of the course content in an online class. Visibility of technological skill seemed to predict definition as an exceptional online teacher both for the full-time faculty and part-time. After talking with the faculty, only Brian seemed to have really incorporated best practice pedagogy for online education into his course.

All part-time instructors were seen as “in need of mentoring” by the associate dean, yet they are the ones teaching the majority of these classes. This may be in part because the full-time faculty had volunteered or eagerly accepted an online course, whereas the part-time instructors felt as if they had less choice in the matter. All instructors received a copied course, except for Brian who was initially paid to create one.

All the instructors mentioned retention pressures coming from administration and had differences only in how they defined a successful course. This was not related to their employment status or definition as an “exceptional” or “in need of mentoring” instructor. Some defined success as student retention and some as a rigorous course. Regardless of the individual instructor’s definition of a successful course, all of them discussed Community’s pressures to create a passable course.

V: CONCLUSION

This research began with the goal of mapping out the larger political, economic and organizational factors that may impact the implementation and practices in an online class, while acknowledging the power of teacher' situationally constrained choice. I wanted to understand how these larger factors created opportunities and constraints for teachers. As Anderson (2004) elaborated, the bulk of online education research has been myopically focused on delivery methods, best practices and retention at the classroom level. I incorporated a broader sociological analysis, influenced heavily by David Noble's, (1998) *Digital Diploma Mills*. Noble articulates that in the case of correspondence education, the economic and political factors were responsible for driving the implementation and practices. More specifically, the enrollment pressures directed funds towards advertising not curriculum and teaching. At Community, the enrollment and retention pressures, overworked teachers, lack of clarity on the mission and the organizational practice of copying courses functioned to encourage the implementation of the easiest course possible.

After interviewing teachers, administrators, associate deans, business managers, and the head of IT, the design and functions of online classes at Community bore a striking resemblance to the correspondence model that Noble reported. The economic influence at Community impacts a teacher's situationally constrained choice in an online class indirectly by encouraging enrollment and retention, while mandating heavy faculty course loads and paying little to nothing for curriculum development. The political influence was also not as direct as previously hypothesized, the influence is not the accrediting agencies but the decisions made by the Board that drive enrollment as well as

the lack of clarity regarding the true mission at Community. Teachers were unclear about if they should be passing students or maintaining a rigorous course. These systemic factors combined with the organizational practice of copying courses, all served to send the message that retention is a priority, which often meant “a passable class”.

Classical sociological paradigms provided a beneficial context for posing questions as well as examining the results that emerged from this study. Peter Berger (1963) explained the sociological perspective most simply as, “seeing the general in the particular”. It’s the ability to recognize the broader social factors such as: history, culture, economics, politics, family and religion that shape our lives as individuals. This sociological perspective allows one to oscillate between the structural arrangements and our personal lives. I applied this type of analysis to online courses at a two-year technical college.

The structural functional paradigm in sociology is a framework for building theory that examines how something is designed and what the functions and dysfunctions are of that design. This perspective views society as a system of interrelated institutions that can only be understood by examining them in context. Noble (1998) utilizes a structural functional analysis to examine correspondence courses and argues that, when studying the impact of any educational practice what is most essential is investigating the broader political and economic systemic factors, which are driving the implementation and practices of online classes at Community. More simply the questions of the structural functionalist are, “How is it designed?” and “What are the effects?” Online courses can have many different outcomes for students because there are larger political, economic and organizational influences that guide the implementation, practices, and,

ultimately, the consequences. It makes more sense to frame the discussion about online course outcomes not on the end results, but on the systemic factors shaping the design and practices.

After looking more closely at online courses, they have several interesting parallels with an earlier form of distance education; correspondence courses. Both correspondence and online courses offered a utopian claim of increased access (anywhere, anytime) and individualized learning (self –paced, constructivist) for the nontraditional student. Both correspondence and online courses also encountered the dystopian counterargument of distance education replicating the social and economic divide by offering an inferior education for nontraditional, often marginalized students. Noble (1998) demonstrated that in the case of correspondence courses the design and implementation almost guaranteed the negative consequences regardless of the method of instruction or dedication of teachers because the success of correspondence courses rested on enrollment. Correspondence education seemed to deliver on the promise to open access to a population previously left out of higher education, but the utopian access claims were quickly challenged by dystopian realities of lower quality education. This educational practice became referred to as “Drop-out Mills,” because of the large number of students who never completed. Noble argues that the quality of the correspondence courses was inferior because of the economic and political factors shaping the implementation and practices (Noble, 1998). What are the consequences of the economic and political factors at Community on an online course?

Economic Influence: Enrollment, Retention, Workload

Initially I assumed that the economic influence on teachers situationally constrained choice could be seen directly through budget or financial aid allocation at Community. This proved not to be the case. As Noble (1998) demonstrated with correspondence classes, the real economic pressures at Community center on enrollment and retention. As Dave (senior budget officer) explained to me, the last budget resulted in a \$70 million cut for Community along with a property tax hike freeze. This tax freeze put Community in a position where enrollment numbers and tuition dollars matter more than ever before. As Lisa explained, the administrations relentless push towards greater enrollment so that departments can make their “value visible,” frequently results in her opening up more online sections. As the Sloan Consortium (2009) demonstrated, the demand for more online courses has exceed the demand for more face-to-face offerings with a growth of 25% in online courses and 21 %in face-to-face. Not too surprisingly, at Community it is the online not the in-class that have student wait lists, but since there are not always qualified teachers for these classes, Lisa needs to find an instructor with little to no experience. Currently, there is a 5-hour Blackboard training session required before teaching an online course. The working assumption as we discovered seems to be that if an instructor can teach face-to-face they can teach online. A second practice which surfaced from the fieldwork is the practice of pushing poor teachers from the traditional format to online classes. The assumption here is that if they are poor in the traditional classroom they will somehow improve when teaching online. There appears to be a mismatch between qualified faculty and course offerings. Lisa explained that this

problem is much more prevalent for online courses, since there are just fewer teachers that have the experience and training to teach online.

The associate dean discussed the pressure to not only increase enrollments, but have general education appear valuable to the college. She felt pressure to add more sections to respond to a growing student demand for online classes. As we learned, this sometimes means putting a teacher in an online class when they are not qualified. It always means no paid preparation and curriculum development time. Certainly this is difficult for any course, but evidence suggests that teaching online requires a huge initial upfront investment to get the class going. What is clear from this study is that Community has been routinely copying course shells for new instructors that often contain only a test bank, prepared quizzes and tests. Moreover, there appear to be no instructions and no oversight for these courses. Instructors noted that since they are not being paid for curriculum development, most decide to use the copied “canned” course.

Currently, then, there is no incentive besides internal to offer a high caliber course (one that is based on rigorous academic standards, and online curricular best practice pedagogy). As a result, faculty must use their free time and own money if they want to improve the course. Sadly, when course improvements do focus on best practices and academic rigor, the result is lower retention rates and higher numbers of student complaints. Brian and Emily (online instructors) discussed the fear that had for their job if they focused on rigor over retention.

Online classes at Community and nationwide have high drop-out and stop-out rates. The average combined drop and fail rate at Community for online classes is around 50%. Community only compares successful completers and unsuccessful completers.

This could be due to failing, dropping the course, or not completing the work. Most students just stop doing the work, hence the term ‘stop-outs’. At Community a several explanations have been offered to explain the reasons for low retention rates, including unmotivated students and the lack of clarity on the mission are the ones that were repeated the most in the interviews. There was an agreement from both the administration and the faculty that there was a mismatch between the students who enroll in an online class and the skills needed to succeed in one. There is a perception by students that online classes are “easier,” so often times the students with the busiest schedules that impede even their ability to get to campus, take these courses.

Brian and Casey (faculty) and Ron and Michelle (administrators) felt that Community needs to make it more difficult to enter an online class so that they could “weed out” those students who were “not motivated to succeed”. Currently the online advisory committee is working on a 5-hour orientation that would be required before students could enroll in an online course. Casey requires his students to attend an in-person orientation with him in order to stay in the course. It must be recognized, however, any impediments that make it more difficult to enroll in online classes will decrease enrollment numbers while increasing retention. Faculty seem to be much more worried about retention at Community since that seems to be the only place where administration are monitoring what happens in their online classes. The administration has not yet made a decision about requiring the online orientation of their online students, likely because it will lower enrollments.

The economic influence at Community was indirect and twofold; enrollment and retention pressures and heavy course loads. Originally I thought that the administration

budget allocation would be driving the implementation and practices in an online class. It seems as if this is in fact the case, but only indirectly. Since the 1980's there have been dramatic shifts in the funding of higher education. Today, more than ever before, tuition is becoming the primary source of revenue (College Board, 2008). At Community, the associate deans are pressured to keep high enrollments. As they open more sections to fulfill the enrollment expectations coming from the top, they are sometimes forced to put in a teacher they know is unqualified. The growing student demand for these classes along with the overall message of the college to increase enrollments was driving the implementation of online courses. What seemed to be shaping the practices in an online class, however, were heavy faculty workloads, and lack of pay for preparation and curriculum development. Faculty did not feel they could improve their online courses because as Brian and Casey explained, "They are completely overloaded" teaching six classes and with no time to improve them. As the part-timers Linda and Emily explained, they are "paid so little for the one class that they do teach", that they are "not willing to spend the time" improving a class for which they are not being sufficiently being paid.

Political Influence: Mission

Initially I believed that higher education accreditation would be influencing the implementation and practices in an online class at Community. After my interview with Sally, (Vice President of Student Learning) it was clear that the accreditation process was an afterthought to demonstrate that Community was providing sound academic online classes according to the commissions broad requirements. After talking with the faculty however, what emerged was that the real political problem for them was the lack of clarity on the mission. In simple terms, "Were they to be retaining students or offering a

rigorous course?” Faculty did not feel these two goals were being equally pursued and, furthermore, equally supported with college resources.

What the faculty made clear is their lack of understanding about the real mission at Community. They are unclear if they are to be offering a rigorous general education course, or a passable one. The general education classes at Community have a state mandated curriculum since they are transferrable to the 4-year college system. The traditional in-class general education classes have about a 30% drop/fail rate. One consequence of this at Community has been that program students cannot complete their programs because they fail their general education courses. As Dave articulated, all departments’ budgets rely on their enrollments, so when we fail students in general education, departments with lower enrollments such as welding, get upset. They may have a student who is a fantastic welder, for example, who can’t pass introduction to economics. On the other hand, departments with waiting lists appreciate the level of difficulty of the general education courses because they “weed out” those students less likely to succeed.

The faculty repeatedly asked, “Is the goal enrollment and retention or high quality education?” The administration and public mission statements make clear that Community expects their education to provide both. What the faculty made clear, however, is that the school is not supporting both. The administration, they argue, has a focus which emphasizes enrollment and retention not high quality education, with the exception of the programs in healthcare that have extensive wait lists. Larry Cuban (1986) says that this is because policy makers ask very different questions about productivity, equity and tests than teachers do. Whereas teachers often base success on

student learning, policy makers are more interested in broader notions of accountability and performance standards.

The only measure of faculty performance that has been presented to faculty has been retention rates, which faculty members see as a clear message about the administration's priorities and values. As we discovered, faculty reported that there is no pedagogical assistance for online teaching, no paid curriculum preparation, and no oversight for these courses. The typical practice is to copy over a previous instructor's "canned" course and to require no changes. The result is that the easier a class is, the more it resembles a correspondence course, the higher the retention rates, the fewer the student complaints, and the easier the teaching task is for the faculty.

Brian (faculty), in particular, expressed a deep frustration in trying to uphold rigorous academic standards in his online courses at Community. As he notes, not only is there virtually no assistance or recognition for doing so, but there is a fear of doing so since it affects faculty's retention rates and the number of student complaints. The common response offered by faculty and a couple of administrators to increase retention rates in the online classes was creating impediments to enroll. Clearly, this will affect some of the utopian claims about online education and enrollment into these courses. Time will tell if administration actually backs up this idea in practice. Rather than offering more assistance to students, the goal has been to keep out the ones who they assume are going to fail.

The parallels between online education at Community and correspondence education are striking. Much like the students at Community, the majority of those who enrolled in correspondence courses were non-traditional students who would not have

otherwise had access to a college education because of work constraints, cost of full-tuition, or enrollment requirements (MacKenzie, Christensen, & Rigby, 1968). The success of correspondence education at the university level rested on securing enrollment. In order to continue to secure and increase enrollment, schools chose to lower or even dismiss enrollment standards entirely. Community has a similar pressure to open up sections of online courses whenever there is a student demand to do so, whether there is a qualified teacher or not. The school benefits with the increased enrollments online classes offer.

Increased access does not necessarily mean quality instruction. At Community, faculty repeatedly complained that they were not paid for curriculum development and not supported by the college to construct a more rigorous course. Interestingly, Noble (1998) argues that while correspondence education mandated the university to direct funds towards advertising and at the same time lowered enrollment standards, they also directed very little of the budget for instruction and curriculum. Teachers were hired to do the correspondence coursework on a piecework basis and many of the instructors were working part-time with a heavy course load. Regular faculty saw correspondence courses as an inferior education and eventually the overall popularity declined as the quality of this education was repeatedly brought into question (Gudea, 2008). While access increased, improved instruction didn't appear to be a realistic outcome. What becomes clear in Noble's (1998) analysis of early forms of distance education is that it was the political and economic factors shaping the implementation and practices of correspondence courses and not necessarily the content of the course or dedication of the teacher that shaped the student outcomes. Many of the same parallels can be seen at

Community with online courses. The focus is on enrollment, the teachers are overloaded and not supported and the consequence is often a passable course.

Teachers Situationally Constrained Choice: “Best Practices”

In my research focus on the broader systemic factors impacting the implementation and practices in an online course I wanted to be careful to avoid overly simplistic deterministic arguments. Thus it became essential to talk with faculty about their meanings and perceptions within these broader constraints. In Larry Cuban’s (1984) book *How Teachers Taught*, he discusses both what teachers are able to do in a classroom as a result of their own motivation, but also what they do as a consequence of how their situation has been constrained by broader political, economic and organizational factors.

Cuban explains situationally constrained choice as the historical, political, economic, cultural and organizational influences that constrain what teachers do in the classroom. At Community, the economic influence that shaped the implementation and practices in an online course was the enrollment and retention pressures. The political impact on the online classes was the lack of clarity on the real mission, in other words, at Community the tension between providing an academically rigorous course or retaining students by offering an easier, more passable course. The organizational support for instructors was both voluntary and minimal through the Teaching Innovation Center (TIC), which offers Blackboard technological support, but no support on pedagogy. This clearly demonstrates the administrations limited understanding about what teacher’s do. The courses, they argue, are interchangeable and can be taught by anyone. Teachers

were not consulted about what they needed but were offered services they could voluntarily attend that were designed by IT managers and not curriculum experts.

When I talked with faculty about their best practices online what became clear were the differences in the definition of best practices and consequently their beliefs about themselves as teachers. Administration repeatedly claimed that faculty should be both providing a rigorous course and retaining students, while maintaining best practices. By contrast, the faculty repeatedly scoffed at this idea. They claimed they could only offer such a stellar class if paid for curriculum development, given more time, provided remedial assistance to students, and received continued education. Administration, however, uniformly feels that either they are currently doing these things or we have to “make do” with what we have.

All the messages being sent both indirectly and directly by the administration focus on the retention of students. The associate deans feel the pressure from higher administrators and the board. The faculty also feels it because they see it is the only measure of evaluation presented to them. Thus, it would seem that when the faculty defines “best practices” in an online class as retention, their class resembles little more than a correspondence course. If, however, a teacher defines “best practices” in an online class as a rigorous and innovative course based on the most up-to-date pedagogical research then they are forced to invest their own time and money to achieve that and their drop-out and failure rates are higher. While teachers can of course, choose to design their course however they wish, the everyday practices of the school clearly constrain those practices. Teachers had different responses to this tension, depending on how they

defined “best practices”. Some of them defined it as retaining students, others as providing a rigorous course.

Organizational Influence: Course Shells

The head of the technology innovation center (TIC) at Community, Ron, views his role as a supportive one for faculty and students in need of assistance with Blackboard. Faculty explained, however, that the support offered had to be on their already limited, often unpaid, time. Moreover, Brian and Casey (faculty) explained how the TIC practices, like the scheduling of when they did Blackboard updates, often interfered with their online classes. Currently, the TIC does not offer assistance in either pedagogy or online “best practices”. This could be seen positively, in that the faculty is given total control over their courses, but the TIC could be the center that exposes teachers to the online education research on pedagogy. The TIC could be the center for innovation and cater itself to the needs of faculty rather than offering support they deem appropriate.

The impact of the TIC in course implementation and everyday practices can be seen most clearly through their practice of copying course shells to new online instructors. There seems to be an assumption that the courses are all the same in quality and interchangeable by instructor. Ron (head of TIC) simply explained that this is something Community has always done and did not see a downside to this practice. This practice illuminates the assumption that courses are discrete, interchangeable products that can be handled by any instructor. Brian (faculty) felt that Ron’s real goal was to have IT manage the online classes, not faculty.

Certainly copying a course shell assists instructors by reducing some of their preparation time, but currently Community provides little incentive to go beyond the copied course shell which often just consists of tests and quizzes offered by textbook publishers. The consequence is a canned course with little academic rigor.

Commercialization: Canned Courses

Noble (1998) argued that online classes are the final frontier in the commodification and commercialization of curriculum. Community is not to the point where they are selling their curriculum for profit, but the ideology of the class as a discrete product can be seen. The course is something that is just copied over and little attention is given to the instructor of the course. The course is commercialized in the way that is seen as a way for the school to increase revenue and enrollment. Clark Kerr (1991) in his book *The Great Transformation of Higher Education 1960-1980*, argues that the commercialization of higher education is the most profound change in higher education of the last few decades, which began with sports and the commercialization of the campus. Only recently has the university functioned as a corporation through commodification of research and the classroom.

Commodification of the classroom can be most easily accomplished with online classes. This could provide cost effective solutions for schools. Recently Chubb and Moe (2012) argued in a Wall Street Journal editorial, that online education will revolutionize education because it will allow competition between schools and the ones who can deliver will succeed. It will also revolutionize the organization of teaching and learning.

The nation and the world are in the early stages of a historic transformation in how students learn, teachers teach, and schools and school systems are organized. This challenge can be met. Over the long term, online technology promises historic improvements in the quality of and access to higher education. The fact is, students do not need to be on campus at Harvard or MIT to experience some of the key benefits of an elite education. Moreover, colleges and universities, whatever their status, do not need to put a professor in every classroom. One Nobel laureate can literally teach a million students, and for a very reasonable tuition price. Online education will lead to the substitution of technology (which is cheap) for labor (which is expensive)—as has happened in every other industry—making schools much more productive (p.1)

It seems as if the ideology has solidified for many that we can substitute online courses for teachers as a way to increase efficiency. The real transformation of education may not be for teaching or learning but a new view of the role of education as a privatized commodity. Lustig (2011) comments on this trend as follows:

There is a politics to this attempted reorganization of the university, but it is not a politics that introduces itself openly in the public space and is eager to argue its case. Rather, it is part of the politics of privatization that has narrowed and degraded public life for years (p.18).

The commodification of curriculum is just a piece in the larger trend of the privatization of the university. Lusting warns,

Today we know, the university defined by these characteristics is besieged—not just from without, but by theories and organizational redesigns promoted within. These theories and models are taken over largely from the world of business, specifically the asset-stripping, CEO-enriching stage of business in which we find ourselves. In post-war America, capital began to seek its profits by commodifying activities in worlds that had previously lain outside the marketplace: hospitals and medical care, the arts, political campaigns. And now we too have become of affection. Parts of the university do have to be run like a business (facilities, for example). But the university as a whole is not a business, and what is exchanged in its classes and seminar rooms are not commodities (p.21).

Time will tell whether the university goes further towards the business model or protects its liberal ideals.

Closing Comments & Future Research

This research began as an effort to understand the broader systemic factors influencing opportunities and constraints on teacher practices in an online course. After talking with faculty and administrators it became clear that the economic enrollment and retention pressures and increased faculty course loads do not encourage the development of academically rigorous online courses based on best practice research. Furthermore, the lack of clarity surrounding the true mission and of organizational support resulted in the use of copied, pre-packaged course shells, where many teachers' defined good online instruction as simply "passable". This study uncovered some of the flawed design implementation that led to not just inferior online courses, but practices that promote it.

Community may not be representative of two-year colleges nationwide, but the systemic practices at Community may be emblematic of systemic practices at many schools. Community is a school whose systemic practices do not encourage a quality online course, but other schools have created systems that support quality online courses. For example, a neighboring 4-year university offers a different model for the implementation and practices for online courses. Trinity* (a pseudonym) incorporates what they call a Seven Step Model for online course implementation and practices. At Trinity, faculty interested in creating an online/blended course, get in contact with the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and express their desire and willingness to teach online/blended courses. The center then selects 10-15 faculty a year to work with. Each faculty member is paid a minimum of \$3,000 to act as the "content expert". The faculty member works directly with an experienced instructional designer and a multi-media

specialist to develop a truly stellar online course. The process of creating the course takes about 3 months.

The instructional designer is then responsible for actually putting the course into D2L with a consistent graphic design that is both professional and easy to navigate.

Trinity offers a three week online course “Facilitating an Online Course” for faculty to learn about best practices when teaching online. Online courses are then evaluated in two ways:

- (1) At midterm students complete a “checking in survey” which is kept anonymous.
- (2) At the end of the course students complete a final course evaluation specifically designed to assess the online learning environment. For all assignments and discussions standardized rubrics are utilized for assessment.

The continuous improvement process at Trinity involves refreshing online courses every 4 years. At this time, faculty are paid \$500 to work, again, with an instructional designer to update resources, multi-media or to take advantage of new tools that have been integrated in the LMS. The system of implementing online courses and encouraging best practices can be designed, when the goals and practices encourage it.

Based on the insights gained from this study, what can Community do to improve the systemic practices to support the development of quality online courses? First, they need to be clear about their mission for online classes. If the mission is providing a rigorous academic course based on best practices, Community needs to offer faculty the resources to accomplish this. The Quality Matters design (2012) discussed earlier would be a great place to start. The Teaching Innovation Center (TIC) could act as the center

for the promotion of this type of online course design. Instead of simply copying courses, the TIC could assist instructors and developing them.

Also, the research uncovered that the enrollment and retention pressures placed on the associate dean encourage her to open more sections of online courses, often without a qualified online instructor. This practice could be changed by only opening additional sections when there is an instructor who is qualified to teach. Instructors could be trained in Blackboard and offered assistance to create a quality online course with the TIC, before they teach online.

The faculty at Community also discussed their heavy workloads and lack of curriculum pay. If Community decides that quality online courses are their mission, they need to offer faculty the resources to be able to provide this, through a decreased workload and paid curriculum development.

This study of Community has answered questions about the economic, political and organizational influences that impact a teacher's situationally constrained choice in an online class at a 2-year college. This study has also raised additional questions that future research should address. For example,

- 1) What are the systemic practices that influence a teacher's situationally constrained choice in a range of 2 and 4-year institutions?
- 2) What can we learn from an examination of institutions that have moved to supporting academically rigorous online courses based on best practices as detailed in the online literature?
- 3) To what degree does a better alignment of mission and practice impact the quality of online instruction?

With attention to these local and broader issues, online education could be created using systemic factors that encourage and promote best practices, rigorous standards, and better student outcomes.

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